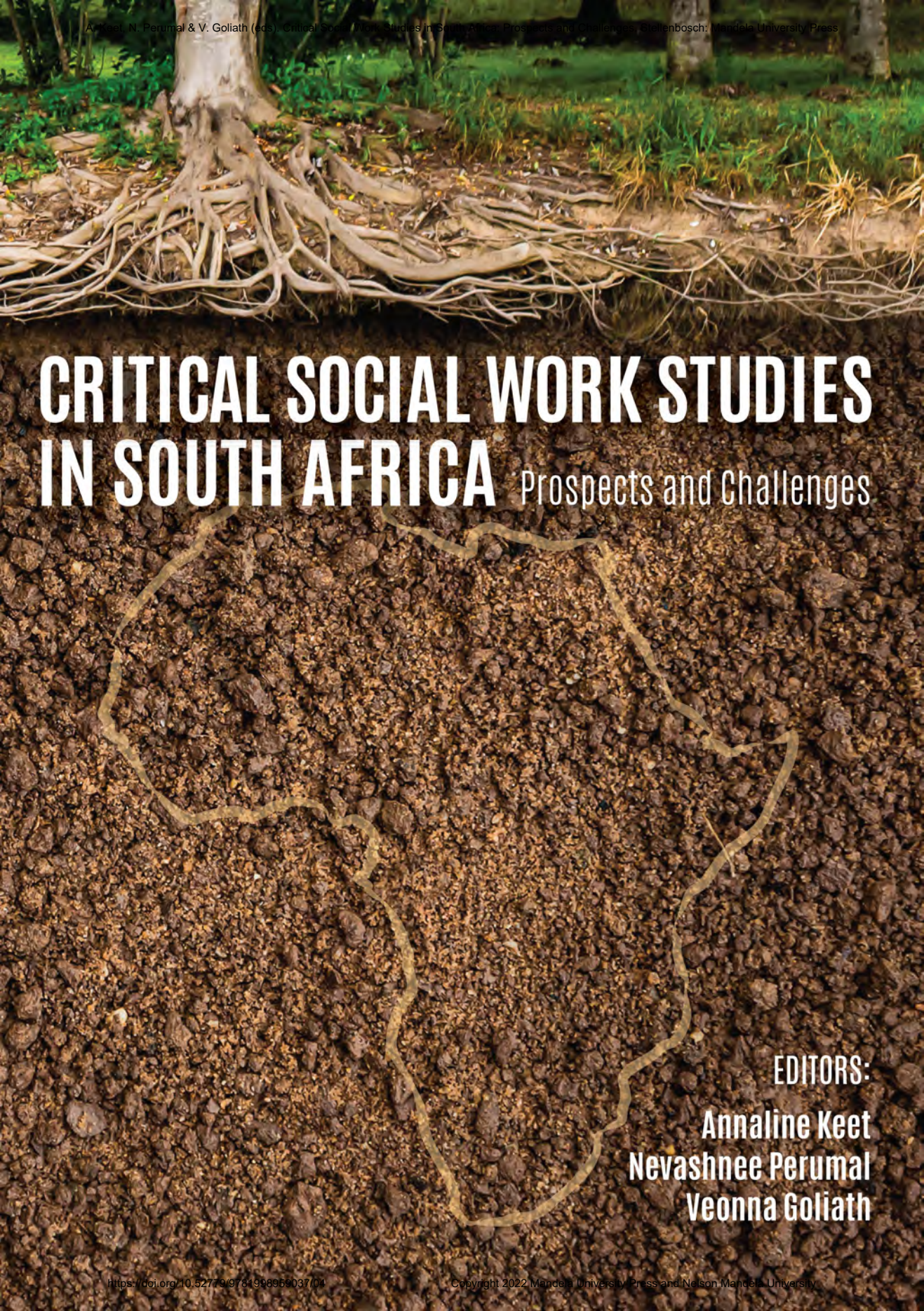


The background of the cover is a photograph of a tree's root system exposed in the soil. The roots are light-colored and spread out across the dark, textured earth. In the center of the cover, a yellow outline of the map of South Africa is superimposed over the roots and soil.

CRITICAL SOCIAL WORK STUDIES IN SOUTH AFRICA

Prospects and Challenges

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LANDLESSNESS AS A NEGATION OF BLACK CHILDREN'S RIGHT TO PLAY

Confronting the depoliticisation of social work

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ABSTRACT

We argue that social work has a conceptual deficit in framing structural problems that overwhelm post-colonial and post-apartheid societies. This deficit emanates from the depoliticisation of the discipline. We locate depoliticisation in critical theory where we observe that social work underestimates the impact of power relations, the economic content of social histories and contemporary conflicts, and how all these forces have intersected to produce unequal societies with stark stratifications – in racial, class, gender and age terms, among others. Social work concepts are imprisoned in the liberal social justice school where emphasis on suffering and social change is placed between individual misfortune and individual effort. We introduce an emancipatory position located in the decolonial school by focusing on intergenerational dehumanisation represented through Black people's landlessness. This is used as a starting place to begin theorising from if social work is to have aspirations of being an impactful discipline with the potential to comprehend structural problems facing post-colonial and post-apartheid societies. We use Black children's 'activity of play' in post-apartheid urban township societies as reference to underscore landlessness and confront the depoliticisation of Social work.

KEYWORDS

Black children, decolonisation of social work, depoliticisation, the right to play

DEPOLITICISATION OF SOCIAL WORK

Social work as a discipline grew from the seeds of European modernity, particularly at the peak of the industrial revolution – a capitalist and geopolitical system defined by mass production and human exploitation. This exploitative modernity is responsible for the existing socio-economic inequalities, environmental degradations and erosions of humanity that we are witnessing in our times. In the past century, we have also observed how this modernity and exploitation internationalised as colonialism and apartheid to the Global South – a period that Du Bois (2007:3) marked by asserting that “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line”. It is on these bases that Yang (2015:226), cited in Zembylas and Keet (2019:131), postulates that the foundations of human exploitation in the developing world “lie in the modern condition, which is a colonial condition”. Internationalism, capitalism and colonialism constructed antagonistic relations – a coloniser and the colonised – with the latter being what the language of social work refers to as ‘vulnerable groups’.

We locate the case of the depoliticisation of social work in South Africa, where the discipline developed under apartheid. It erased Black histories, concepts and experiences in its theoretical and practice development. Whiteness was entrenched as the basis of its curriculum content and practice where social ills were comprehended from the experiences of a White individual (Smith, 2014). In this framework, Western notions of framing society as an individual adventure were advanced at the expense of structural, holistic and social forces that are responsible for the suffering of humanity. We seek to gain entry into this conversation of decolonising social work by arguing that Black feminist approaches and critical race approaches including their historicisation and contemporary work should inform our understanding of social challenges in our times. Briskman (2008:83-84) affirms this position by asking for “a more progressive revisioning where Social Work practice is overtly linked to the political domain and challenges the idea that existing social structures are fixed or even desirable ... it is only with such revisioning that anticolonialism, social justice, and emancipation can be at the forefront of practice”.

We have selected the experience of playing by Black children in post-apartheid South African township communities to make our argument. These communities are constructs of landlessness, displacement and dehumanisation of Black people over centuries. They remain underdeveloped, small, overpopulated and devoid of any possibility of producing functioning families with well-rounded children. Playing in such congested communities is impossible unless spaces are invented by children themselves under risky conditions. We believe and know that playing is a key activity that facilitates the cognitive development and emotional growth of a child. Playing requires a conducive household structure with space and a functioning, healthy

family structure to arise. Playing needs land. In other words, children cannot develop cognitively, socially and emotionally to be healthy up into their adulthood without access to land. However, existing scholarship on children's experience of playing does not deepen its concepts as far as the land question. Playing in social work studies remains imprisoned in the domain of psychological shortfalls where personal care, household guardianship and welfare institutionalisation are advanced as possible therapies. We argue that this is the depoliticisation of the discipline and if it is not critiqued from a decolonial point of view, it will continue to fall short as a discipline in providing key theoretical breakthroughs that would best fit the pressing challenges of our post-colonial and post-apartheid epoch.

To make this argument, the chapter will be divided into six sections. The first section outlines the study's theoretical framework. The second section tables landlessness and displacement as primary problems to comprehend the position of Black people in post-apartheid South Africa. The third section attaches the concept of landlessness to the experience of playing and the cognitive consequences of this injustice on children's development. The fourth section provides further critique of liberal social work. The fifth section turns the page to examine the practical implications of landlessness on a Black household and how the post-apartheid order has installed further neoliberalisation on the dehumanisation of the Black family, the primary environment where a child is raised from and begins to socialise. Section six provides closing remarks.

CRITICAL THEORY

Inequalities of race, class and gender that emerge from Black people's dehumanisation and landlessness will be framed as the relations of power that organise the post-colonial and post-apartheid state of South Africa (Madlingozi, 2017). In this regard, the chapter will pull from multiple sets of theoretical concepts that are fit to describe the complex post-conflict condition of South Africa – a condition of settler colonialism defined by race and class questions (Magubane, 1979), gendered violence (Gqola, 2015) and anti-Black systematic oppression against vulnerable groups such as children (Steady, 2005). These stratifications will be intersectionally utilised as critical theory.

LANDLESSNESS AND DISPLACEMENT

Dladla (2018) reminds us that land dispossession and conquest were the main features of colonialism in South Africa. As indigenous inhabitants of Southern African territory, Black people lived off the land for their survivalist, social, economic, cultural and spiritual livelihood (Mazibuko, 2000). The invasion of African land by European colonisers entailed the violent confiscation of indigenous land. Black

people as a landless class were stripped of their intellectual and socio-economic asset, which constrained them from practicing their basic traditions of subsistence livelihood. As a result, Black people had to forcefully accept and practice the living standards of European modernity (Van der Horst, 1942:18) – which was to work for most of the day in anticipation of wages and a public obligation to pay personal taxes (Hendricks, 2013).

For South African Black people though, the practice of European modernity was exercised under settler-colonial conditions of landlessness (Jordan, 1997). In other words, Black people were economically powerless and they also did not possess any political rights to determine their citizenship (Mignolo, 2006). On this score, the colonial ecopolitical class had total control of Black people – it was able to determine their geographic location, labour exploitative practices and their movement (Mamdani, 1996:22). The foothold of the colonial administration on the indigenous population continued from the 17th to the 19th centuries before intensifying further in the 20th century to involve direct apartheid (Ngcukaitobi, 2018:6). This spatial discrimination, labour exploitation, gender humiliation and race oppression against Black people was carried through for subsequent generations, and as a consequence, racialised domination has been internalised and institutionalised in the psychosocial, political, legal and economic architecture of South Africa as a whole (Madlingozi, 2017; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2017). The racialised social infrastructure of contemporary South Africa still arranges its private and public life (Madlingozi, 2017; Mokoena, 2014) – and it is on this wavelength that various scholars have referred to South Africa as a neo-colonial state (Dladla, 2018) and a neo-apartheid society (Madlingozi, 2017).

We locate the crisis of Black people's displacement on the housing question – and we begin by historicising it in two folds:

1. from the forceful mass urbanisation of Black people to the major cities of South Africa to serve the industrialising apartheid economy, particularly in the 1940s, and
2. from the Group Areas Act of 1950, an apartheid state policy which compartmentalised people's settlement areas in South Africa at the time according to race.

These two developments occurred both separately and concurrently to advance the racial objectives of the apartheid state. Firstly, the apartheid economy was based on mining, manufacturing and agriculture (Magubane, 1979:123). These were labour intensive industries which mainly required a high number of male, low-semi-skilled labour (Reed, 2013). Thus, Black people as a landless class were acquired from the Bantustans to serve the urban apartheid economy as cheap labour (Barchiesi, 2011) and as temporal residents of the major cities from where these economies were operating (Maylam 1990, 1995). In the main, this acquisition of cheap Black labour was characterised by the migration of working-age men (Reed, 2013) – which disabled

and fragmented the natural development of African families (Magadla, 2016). Later, the 'care economy' of the urban White property class also required domestic workers in the form of Black women to provide household labour (Pitso, 2019).

The need for urban housing by this cheap Black labour to be in close proximity to its work places necessitated the building of informal settlements and matchbox houses on the fringes of apartheid cities (Mabin, 2005:14-15). As Black people further migrated into the cities in increasing numbers as the apartheid economy grew, Black people's increasing demand for settlement outpaced the available supply of housing and urban land space (Soni, 2005:42). In this regard, Black people overpopulated their township dwellings and they also began to construct more informal settlements closer to the White urban areas (Soni, 2005:44). These developments pushed the apartheid government to pass the Group Areas Act of 1950 which marked off the urban area as an exclusive boundary space for the White population, no matter the circumstances. Thus, Black people became permanently locked in their overpopulated townships and informal settlements on the periphery of the city. They could visit the White urban areas during daylight for purposes of long hours of labour (Magubane, 1979:131). This social engineering of public life also filtered into the transport service of the apartheid society – which Black people used to interface with the White urban areas, beginning at early hours of the morning and returning to their overpopulated homes at late hours of the evening (Khosa, 2005:189).

The overpopulation of public amenities such as housing, communities, public transport, schooling, workplaces and recreational facilities became the normalised livelihood of apartheid reality for Black people. The lives of Black people took on a survivalist outlook, existing from pay cheque to pay cheque under precarious working conditions and earning low wages (Barchiesi, 2011). The Mines and Work Act of 1926 also meant that Black people could not own property and trade in skilled professions. The Bantu Education Act of 1953 also reserved them to be taught basic education that did not extend to higher abstraction disciplines such as science, mathematics, technology and engineering.

These realities gave little time for family care, generational investment and economic innovation for the Black population group. The social engineering to which apartheid sociology subjected Black people made it nearly impossible for them to have decent houses, functioning family households, conducive spaces to formulate communities and liberty to pay attention to the cognitive and social development of their children. Under such apartheid conditions, children did not have the social space and psychological support to freely and fully express their right to play. In other words, the industrialising apartheid economy came at the expense of children's authentic growth and the natural development of Black families.

BLACK CHILDREN CANNOT PLAY WITHOUT LAND

The United Nations' (UN) Convention on the Rights of Children, Article 31, recognises playing and leisure time for children as a fundamental human right that must be upheld by all democratic states (UN, 1990), and the South African government adhered to this requirement by adopting its 1996 Constitution with a Bill of Rights and later the Children's Act of 2005 that carries similar principles. We locate the playing activities of children in this case in the African family household. This provides sufficient room to contextualise this specific human right within the functioning of the overall African extended family. This approach covers a critical scholarship gap, as most analysis of 'children's right to play' tends to be connected with formal schooling. Sutton (2008) argues that informal 'street playing' by children from disadvantaged communities is as beneficial as playing that takes place in formal schooling environments. Miller and Almon (2009) add that what is important to underscore is that as long as playing is self-generated by children in their own natural setting, it will still cultivate and improve their learning, cognitive development, socioemotional growth, language competencies, creativity and critical thinking, regardless of the playing space being utilised.

But, Miller and Almon (2009) also caution us that the playing space that children utilise should not be underestimated as it has the potential to expose their vulnerability further. For instance, family households can be risky spaces for children, as the South African Police Service (SAPS) (2018:44) revealed that sexual crimes involving children were committed by close family members, relatives and known neighbours. In addition, formal schooling also poses similar threats to children as cases of cyberbullying in the schooling environment continue to be on the rise with the increased usage of social media in recent history (Todres, 2019:219). Still, as concerning as these incidents may be, they do not take away the important role that a family household plays as a natural environment responsible for children's upbringing and socialisation.

The state of the social housing programme in South Africa has been widely reported by various institutions inside and outside South Africa. Fortunately, South Africa's post-apartheid government has been transparent in reporting its successes and failures in the social housing project. A diverse range of reports and assessments are publicly available on digital platforms of government, universities, research institutes, the private sector and mainstream media, whom all freely report on the degree of how the right to housing has been addressed in post-apartheid South Africa. What has been lacking though is a critical review of how social housing has adhered to meeting the basic needs of vulnerable groups such as children. Furthermore, the profession of social work has also not been comprehensively assessed on how it negotiates with the

contradictions that come with the need for social housing against children's desire to play as growing human beings who are members of family households occupying the newly built social houses. A critical assessment of these contradictions will reveal the underlying assumptions and conceptual limitations of social work as a discipline and profession, including the shortcomings of the frameworks that the post-apartheid government has been utilising to carry out its social housing project.

Children's inability to play in their natural environment is a significant violation of their rights. The small social housing unit which has been a feature of township life in post-apartheid South Africa does not cater for the holistic development of the child. The conditions of such social houses, their sizes specifically, disempower children from fully exercising their right to play in a manner that broadens their imaginative construction of the social world.

This creates two existential problems for the post-apartheid government:

1. the erasure of children and their basic rights alienates African households from a dignified livelihood, their citizenship and their indigenous cosmology, and
2. by extension, this also means that social justice in post-apartheid South Africa is still a distant ambition that is yet to uphold the dignity of Black people.

It is important though to historicise, contextualise and politicise these issues to the localised reality of South Africa. For instance, the nature of the post-apartheid project that had the Black majority of its population locating high expectations in a fiscally-constrained government operationalised in a low-growth economy, compelling it to underperform in the delivery of social services. In addition, these also entangle the post-apartheid government in political compromises and unfortunate trade-offs wherein it has to prioritise one human right over the other. These are inherent contradictions of a neoliberal government. These contextual challenges, unique to the South African reality, should be considered as South Africa grows further into its emerging, contested and complex post-apartheid epoch.

LIBERAL SOCIAL WORK: A CRITIQUE

Still, such shortcomings should not stand in the way of government, universities and civil society from doing what is necessary to change the social work discipline and profession. Given the socio-economic contradictions facing South Africa, a further delay in the programme to decolonise social work could pose more social, political and epistemic risks. Yet, the existing liberal canons that define social work studies are not an accident. Western industrial modernity such as colonialism and slavery enlarged the definition of 'vulnerable groups' for the profession to include indigenous people, Black people, and women. Midgley (2008:39) submits that the exporting

of social work as a discipline and a profession to formerly colonised continents, or its ‘internationalisation’ rather, birthed what he called “professional imperialism” (2008:37). Thus, the application of ‘charity’ and ‘welfare’ approaches to an African population that has been structurally disfranchised by centuries of colonialism and apartheid delivered inadequate interventions. In particular, the nation state in Africa has been found to be underprepared to comprehensively provide the necessary resources, infrastructure, human capital, technology and collaborative domestic and international know-how to practice social welfare prerequisites as envisaged from Western industrial sensibilities (Freund, 2016).

South Africa particularly, a colony that endured both colonialism and apartheid, from brutal British settler invasion until 27 years ago, is entangled in deep-seated social, economic and political challenges that are entirely racialised (Madlingozi, 2017). Its major feature of apartheid-colonialism was land dispossession of the indigenous majority by a White settler minority (Dladla, 2018) – and this historical injustice is at the heart of the country’s racialised patterns of poverty, wealth inequality and high levels of unemployment (National Planning Commission, 2011:356). As such, as Midgley (2008:34) argues, it would be appropriate then to have a social work conceptualisation that is “uniquely suited to the needs and economic, social and cultural circumstances of local societies”.

Garrow and Hasenfeld (2015) stretch the critique of social work as a policy institution and profession by stating that it has been a relegated field that prioritises individual-level interventions where a person’s circumstances are inflated above structural challenges that may be responsible for their plight. In other words, the psychological probing of people’s problems take precedence over sociological analysis. This outlook of social interpretation is also noticeable in contemporary poverty studies where disadvantaged groups of people undergoing socio-economic exploitation are blamed for their dehumanisation (Costa & Dias, 2015). In this kind of discourse, various issues are mounted to justify disadvantaged people’s circumstances, ranging from their alleged laziness, illiteracy and a lack of entrepreneurial spirit (see Mbele, 2016). The same thread of ‘victim shaming’ has been observed in the advancement of racist and sexist discourses over the years where socially constructed ideals such as excellence, hard work and wealth have been associated with the individual prowess of the White male while underachievement, poverty, disease and unemployment have been attributed to the personal weaknesses of Black and female population groups (Bird & Gray, 2008:65).

This framework of analysing reality depicts social existence as an outcome of personal effort. It assumes that personal resilience rests with a person’s individual characteristics as a tool to transform their socio-economic fortunes. We argue that this is how

depoliticisation is constructed and the discipline and profession of social work has been complicit in the advancement of these liberal ideas in four ways:

1. the concentration of social work in the liberal application of ethics as a personal responsibility of individual honesty and integrity, instead of decolonising ethical responsibilities to be social justice canons utilised to structurally, historically and truthfully alleviate injustices facing indigenous communities (Bird & Gray, 2008:65);
2. the compartmentalisation of the individual and their society separately (Garrow & Hasenfeld, 2015);
3. the absorption and comfort with the declaration of universalising human rights and policy objectives that give transformative impressions without political willingness and practical political action in localised contexts (Bird & Gray, 2008:69); and
4. the overreliance on false generosity and short-term charity interventions that are unsustainable and inadequate in alleviating people's structural inequalities comprehensively (Zembylas, 2019).

THE NEOLIBERALISM OF DISPLACEMENT

The post-apartheid government was democratically elected with high expectations to build social housing, among other human needs, specifically for previously disadvantaged groups such as Black people, women, youth and differently abled people (Mandela & Langa, 2018:3-4). The social housing scheme was one of the 'stand-out' policies and initiatives of the new post-1994 government at the time (RSA, 1994:9). The economic and fiscal realities of the post-apartheid government provided significant limitations on its capacity to deliver the envisaged social housing programme adequately (Department of Human Settlements, 2014:12). In particular, people preferred to reside in areas closest to economic opportunities in urban areas. This need did not arise without its challenges.

Firstly, the apartheid government had spatially determined the economic fortunes of South Africans mainly according to racialised geographic locations. Secondly, Black people were housed far away from urban opportunities through apartheid legislation. Thirdly, the underling structures of apartheid planning continued unabated into the democratic transition wherein the building of new social houses by the new government reproduced the apartheid city, which was curtailed this time around mainly with the replacement of race division with class division (Bond, 2004). Fourthly, the post-apartheid government has been unable to maximise tax revenue into its fiscus due to the low levels of economic growth that the South African economy continues to generate (Department of Human Settlements, 2014:25). Bhorat, Naidoo, Oosthuizen and Pillay (2016:229) show that for the past 35 years, the South African economy has been growing at an average rate of 3.19%, which makes it almost impossible for the government to obtain sufficient tax revenue to roll out quality social services for its entire population.

The pioneering ethos in the building of social houses by the post-apartheid government has been based on the prioritisation of massified access to housing units at the expense of their quality (Osman & Karusseit, 2008). From a scarcity point of view, the numerical superiority of Black people as a disadvantaged group in dire need of housing adds pressure on the skewed public resources of the current government. Thus, the fiscal constraints under which the post-apartheid government builds social houses compels it to meet the most basic of requirements for housing units. This materialistic approach privileges the tangible and immediate occupation of houses by people, over other equally important immaterial and intangible aspects that are difficult to administratively and visibly measure, such as people's dignity and cultural security (Joseph, Magni & Maree, 2015:3). This also means that the positioning of urban land as a commodity and the inequalities that this practice generates is an integral part of a largely failed social housing programme to address the material effects of landlessness (Mkhize, 2015:6). As a result, the mass occupation of such houses by extended families who are also underprivileged creates a disjuncture between their expectations and government's capabilities as far as what consists a delivery of a decent home is concerned.

CONCLUSION

The current emphasis then of social work on individual functional basic human rights does not fundamentally transform the lives of previously disadvantaged people and communities sufficiently to undo the impact of apartheid colonialism. Therefore, it is important for social work studies to adopt a more critical, decolonial and collaborative approach to truly serve South Africa's post-apartheid challenges.

- *Critical* – in the sense that the discipline must question and deepen its own ontological roots and seriously interrogate the quality, purpose, impact and perspective of its knowledges.
- *Decolonial* – in the sense that social work studies must surface a scholarship that has an epistemic commitment to unmask its colonial and racist heritage – and begin to centre theories generated from African people's languages, values, philosophies and local experiences of life, which were pushed to the margins by the colonial, apartheid and post-apartheid consensus.

- *Collaborative* – in the sense that social work studies must break down their isolation and begin to see themselves as a crucial organ of the Africanisation of the humanities project alongside other sciences. Social work must form part of the programmatic work to transform and renew the academy. In this regard, the housing question then and its fundamental impact on children's cognitive development is instrumental in locating 'the land' and anticolonialism in the canon of social work studies. Therefore, when children's right to play and the right to social housing are critically and collaboratively analysed, contextualised and historicised, they are clearly political issues that should be prioritised, standardised and institutionalised as the crux of unresolved social injustices that require extensive tools of a new 'problematizing' social work paradigm embedded in decolonisation.

Critical Social Work Studies in South Africa: Prospects and Challenges

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