Winner Africa Thesis Award 2016: Tanja Hendriks: ‘Home is always home’. (Former) Street Youth in Blantyre Malawi and the Fluidity of Constructing Home

About the thesis
For many Malawians the concept of home is strongly associated with the rural areas and one’s (supposedly rural) place of birth. This ‘grand narrative about home’ doesn’t necessarily depict lived reality. Malawi’s history of movement and labor migration coupled with contemporary rapid urbanization makes that the amount of people whose lives do not fit this grand narrative, is increasing fast. In the current context of extreme poverty, destitution and devastation – the latter due to the flash floods of January 2015 – slum areas in Blantyre city are growing and so is the number of street children and youth. Some of them are taken in by organizations such as the Samaritan Trust; a street children shelter. This program aims at taking street youth home by ‘reintegrating’ them in their (rural) communities. When asked, the majority of (former) street youth adhere to the grand narrative and state their home to be in a rural village. Yet at the same time, this home is a place they intentionally left and do not wish to (currently) return to. Hence they are generally depicted as ‘homeless’. Hendriks wondered: how do (former) street youth in Blantyre, Malawi, engage with ‘the grand narrative about home’ in trying to imagine their ‘becoming at home’ in the city?

The jury commands Tanja’s thesis for being an extremely well-written and engaging thesis on the different ways in which “home” is constructed by street children and youth in Malawi. Building further on Bauman’s concepts of liquidity and fluidity, she arrives at the conclusion that “home” itself is a liquid concept, multiple “homes” can be recognized, each with positive and negative associations and feelings of belonging. Tanja learned to speak Chichewa, which not only shows her commitment and deep engagement to the study topic, but also enabled her to conduct ethnographic-type of research using participant observation, interviews with youth and caretaker organizations, and focus groups. This gave her in-depth insights into young people’s experiences, life views, and new knowledge on the highly subjective concept of “home’. The thesis is an excellent example of combining the academic with the personal, in a deeply reflexive and lucid manner.

Tanja Hendriks holds a bachelor’s degree in Cultural Anthropology (2012) and a master’s degree in International Development Studies (2015) from the University of Amsterdam. In 2016 she graduated from Leiden University, having completed the Research Master African Studies. Her main research interests include storytelling, Malawi, ethnography, philosophy of science, linguistic anthropology and the politics of language. Since August 2016 she has been working for the ASCL as a junior researcher on labour relations and informal workers’ organizations in the informal economy in Accra, Ghana.

Runners-up
This year 42 theses were submitted for the Africa Thesis Award. The jury would like to make a special mention of Leonor Faber-Jonker’s thesis 'More than just an object': a material analysis of the return and retention of Namibian skulls from Germany. Faber graduated cum laude in the Research Master in Modern History at Utrecht University.

The jury
I wish to thank the jury of the 2016 Africa Thesis Award for the careful reading of all theses and their well thought through final decision: Dr Akinyinka Akinyoade (African Studies Centre.
Leiden); Drs Wim Brummelman (journalist NRC); Ms. Likoko Eunice (PhD fellow, University of Amsterdam) and Dr Karin Nijenhuis (African Studies Centre Leiden).

Nicky Pouw (University of Amsterdam), chair of the jury