Geography and subjectivity in the city’s suburban schools
Spatial organisation under apartheid succeeded in locking people into racialised enclaves. Schools helped reproduce race-determined subjectivities which kept people locked in racial space, fomented by the materially differentiated application of state resources. Perceptions about these spaces and their schools play a key role in school choice in the democratic period. Founded on newly constructed “senses of self” in the anxious geographic terrain of the post-apartheid city, people are now bursting through the city’s racial enclosures to access those schools that connect with their lived aspirations. This movement is based on a mix of motivations, informed by the desire for class mobility, security and safety, and an environment free from the contaminations of recalcitrant peer associations.

The following example of school choice dynamics in a 10 km square stretch of land in Cape Town, which I label the Cape Flats basin, highlights the interaction between geography and people’s lived practices in determining the subjectivity of schools. The basin encompasses a former white suburb. Adjacent to it and separated by a railway line is the oldest black township in the city. Around the former black and white spaces lies the so-called coloured Cape Flats. The basin is thus made up of three contiguous former racially segregated locations, each with vastly different material surfaces.

The former white segment of the basin has three reasonably good-quality schools. Based on the logic of “the school elsewhere”, these schools are now accessed by children from the adjacent black and coloured townships. The black children walk across the railway line, and the coloured children come to school with family or public transport, from the surrounding coloured areas but also from further away on the “deeper” Cape Flats.

People actively seek out schools to send their children to. Here school choice is determined by a complex interplay of factors based on geography, racial re-inscription, and the cultural production of images of the schools. While the ability to pay school fees plays an important role in assessing the schools, it is how the children interpret the basin’s geography that is crucial in their school choices. One of the schools attracts black children from the adjacent township because of its close proximity to the township. Of this school’s students, 95% are black children from the township. They simply walk a short distance across the railway line to their school. The second school attracts mostly coloured (65%) and some black children, who either take public transport or are driven to school by their lower middle class
parents from the surrounding Cape Flats. The third school attracts mostly white children (70%). This schools invokes the governmental “soft zoning” policy, which gives preference to residents who live in a five kilometer radius from the school (Fiske and Ladd 2004).

This former white suburb’s school choice market (see Woolman and Fleisch 2006) has thus acquired its character from the specific nature of the geographically based flows into and inside its environs. Race and class have here been re-articulated or re-arranged by newer mobilities in the post-apartheid period. Variations on this theme are found in spaces across the city, not just in former white suburban spaces of the city.

It is important to consider what is going on inside the city’s suburban schools. Fragments of this story have begun to emerge during the last few years (see Soudien and Sayed 2004; Sayed, Carrim and Soudien 2003; Johnson 2007; Vandeyar 2008; Fataar 2007a; Dolby 2001). Soudien, Carrim and Sayed’s (2003) work provides a basis for understanding how inclusion and exclusion work in South Africa’s urban schools, and what goes on inside these schools. How the schools go about establishing their popular images is pivotal in attracting the “right” type of student and family. These processes depend on the cultural production processes inside the schools and the popular outward projection of the schools’ image. Soudien and Sayed (2004, 104) are particularly harsh on the South African government’s preferred policy of decentralised school governance which, they argue, has not provided school communities the policy levers to develop school practices based on non discrimination and inclusion.

Governance control is handed down by the state to the local school site, which allows school communities to retain a fair amount of autonomy over key cultural production processes. Soudien and Sayed (2004, 113) suggest that, “in shifting power to the local site, the ability of the state to manage the reforms as a package is severely compromised and undermined. The effect of this is two-fold: it disguises and hides conflict where it happens, and secondly, it fails to counter the racially encoded practices inside the reforms. Jansen (1998, 74) argues that black children in these former white, now mixed, schools encounter a hostile environment where children learn that “English has status while Zulu doesn’t; that good teachers are white; that appropriate history is European’ and that failure happens to non-white children”.


The incoming children learn to navigate the culturally incongruent discursive environment of suburban schools, which tend to ignore their cultural identities. The subjective character of these schools is “overdetermined” by what the literature refers to as the schools’ cultural project of assimilation (see Dolby 2001; Johnson 2007 and Vandeyar 2008). This is in reference to the construction of a set of cultural scripts informed by racial – cultural mutations. As described by Dolby (2001, 7) race, shorn of its blunt colour coding, has mutated into cultural ways of being. Whiteness has shifted from crude expressions of race to take on a set of cultural forms in the schools, i.e. habits of being expressed in the predominant sport, cultural and educational forms that pre-existed the post-racial period. The valorisation of either English or Afrikaans as the lingua franca, and the language of acceptance and incorporation at the schools, plays a key role in this cultural hegemony.

The translocating children have to adapt to and fit into the pre-existing habits of being, either having to downplay their own cultural backgrounds or to express them awkwardly in moments of cultural “fetishisation” in the context of school plays or cultural displays. The cultural script at the three schools in the suburb discussed above has, for example, remained predominantly Cape liberal English (see Fiske and Ladd 2004) in spite of the diverse racial composition of the schools. These schools genuflect to the cultural identities of the children, but they never substantively reorganize their reflexivities to properly incorporate and respond to their new integrated situation (see Vandeyar 2008 and Johnson 2007).

Governance mechanisms are actively used by parent-dominated school governing bodies (SGBs) who, under the aegis of decentralised control, protect and project their schools’ hegemonic cultural orientations. Fees, language, and standards are the chief mechanisms in these exclusionary processes (Soudien and Sayed 2004). Exorbitant fees are a key excluder. Only those who can afford the fees are allowed through the door. The stigma attached to parents’ applying for exemption from fees, which governmental policy makes allowance for, and the possibility of legal action against defaulters, which SGBs institute routinely, dissuade poorer parents from enrolling their children in these schools.

A number of cultural incongruities characterise the operations of the suburban school. The hegemonic cultural orientations of the schools are secured by the
persistence of predominantly white teachers who transmit the assimilative scripts. Many of these schools have managed to keep their teaching complement largely white. At one girls’ school in Cape Town, where I did some qualitative work, the teachers see it as their morally ordained duty to educate for middle-class civility. In their own words, they are “race blind”, or they “don’t see race”. I have suggested that cultural assimilation into the dominant ethos is accomplished on the basis of an assumed egalitarianism mainly practiced by teachers who refuse to acknowledge racial differences as fundamental to the girls’ lives and the school community’s social relations. I concluded that this stance prevents constructive mediation of racial and cultural difference from becoming part of the school’s reference world, which precludes the productive incorporation of difference into the school’s functional culture (see Fataar 2007a, 24–27).

Parents and children are transient passers-through in these schools. Grateful that their children have been accepted in the “white” school, often dropping their children off on their way to work in a myriad of complex transport arrangements, and none the wiser as to the functioning of these schools, parents generally do not engage with their children’s schools’ cultural and operational discourses. Assimilation into the pre-existing culturally white ethos of the school is as much facilitated by the white teachers at the school as by the non-engagement of parents who are spatially (they live elsewhere in the city) and conceptually (they have not experienced the schools first hand as students themselves) distanced from their children’s schools’ hegemonic cultural tropes.

**Spatialised desire lines across lines of subordination**

Schooling-related desire lines, made up of flows and leaks (Mbembe 2004, 386), occur daily across lines of subordination, i.e. the flows between coloured and black spaces in the city. These flows are seldom by coloured students moving into black township schools. Instead, in a city such as Cape Town, where the black townships are contiguous with coloured townships, black children stream over to schools in coloured areas. Residential integration in black and coloured areas is still minimal. Coloureds mostly live in the erstwhile apartheid allocated coloured townships and blacks in the black townships.

Many former coloured schools have been encouraging the migration of black children into their schools. They have had to contend with the large-
scale translocation of class-aspiring coloured children in their areas who leave for suburban middle class schools, either to former white suburbs or the few middle-class former coloured schools with a good reputation. These children take their cultural capital with them to the remoter schools elsewhere. Aspiring children in typical coloured townships, who do not migrate out of the township, access those few schools in the township where the inclusion cultures are stringently tied to appropriate behaviour and good performance.

Most of the students from the adjacent black townships do not attend these relatively well-performing coloured schools (see Weber 2006). Instead, they access the more poorly performing schools that encourage black enrolment to augment their student numbers. “Township jumping” by these black children, therefore, brings them face to face with largely dysfunctional schools in coloured townships. While not hostile, these schools generally have not substantially attenuated their subjectivities to incorporate these differently raced incoming students. They have been assimilated into the pre-existing “coloured” ways of being, transacted in the light of a largely coloured teaching corps and the numerical and cultural domination of the coloured students. Like their suburban counterparts, these schools have not been engaging actively in deep integration processes (see Tihanyi 2006) which give credence to the identities of the incoming black children. Instead, the black children are exposed to what Soudien (2004, 11) refers to as “assimilation by stealth”, based on the idea that the schools’ prior non-racial political commitments are sufficient for the assimilation of the black students. Sometimes, they are confronted with crude racial epithets and behaviour meted out by the coloured students or teachers.

Racial associations here have been fashioned along linguistic lines. Most of the black students are Xhosa-speaking while the coloured students speak Afrikaans or English. At many of these schools, the black students are placed in Xhosa-medium classes taught by the small number of recently appointed black teachers. This has led to associations formed among the students along racial lines in both the formal spaces in the classroom, sport, cultural events and school assemblies, and in their informal socialisation on the playground and in extra-school liaisons (Weber 2006, 179–193). It is therefore clear that the school environments encountered by the black students are relatively hostile towards them. They suffer from isolation and streaming as black students with a language marginal to the functional identities of the school.
There is very little recognition of their cultural and material backgrounds. Substantive integration into the schools’ recognition and inclusion practices is largely absent. Stymied by language, and exposed to a low-quality education that primarily targets high-school completion, the desire lines established by these black students have a deeply ambiguous outcome. Unshackled from the space of the black township and the “educational lack” of its schools, they are not offered the desired school quality in the schools of the adjacent coloured townships. These schools expose their black students to a double negative: on the one hand their educational quality is poor, and they experience daily discrimination and cultural exclusion on the other.