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Students' Bodily Carvings in School Spaces of the Post-Apartheid City

Aslam Fataar

The (post)-colonized person is a living, talking, conscious, active individual whose identity arises from a three-pronged movement of violation, erasure and self-writing. (Mbembe, 2006, p. 3)

This article is an account of the school-going subject who moves across the post-apartheid city in search of viable educational circumstances. It presents one way of apprehending the dynamic interaction between the rapidly reconfiguring city and young people's exercise of school choice in it. Poor Black children are the focus of this account; specifically their ability to navigate rewired urban space and, in the process, transacting feasible lives in the light of desperate urban living. It is the main argument of this article that they do so largely in parallel to the normative school choice discourses—unrecognised and undervalued by their urban schools. The notion 'bodies in space' is apposite to capture the complex ways in which these children go about accessing the city and its schools. However, in spite of these precarious bodily carvings, the extant formal discourses of the city are oblivious to the ontological presence of the Black Other, in the form of these school-going children. Their mobile subject making in the city remain an invisible presence, with consequences for what the city is able to recognize and the schools (in)ability to offer genuinely inclusive institutional cultures. I suggest that these children carve out aspirant bodily dispositions while actively engaging their city's social and educational infrastructures. The view of the 'body as infrastructure' (see Simone, 2008) is given prominence in exploring their urban bodily adaptations.

This article contributes to a nascent body of work that attempts to bring the submerged worlds of the Black urban under-classes in the South African city to academic consciousness. Nuttall and Mbembe's (2008) edited collection on the city of Johannesburg, which they conceptualise as an 'elusive metropolis,' does much to recuperate a form of scholarship that punctures functionalist readings of cities. Their work sets out an interrogation of Africa as a sign of modern social formation,

based on a gesture of defamiliarization, and a commitment to providing a sense of the worldliness of contemporary African life forms. Life forms in the 'Afropolitan' city, they suggest, involve connections among various forms of circulation—people, capital, finance, images—and overlapping spaces and times. Writing about the worldliness of the contemporary African city requires a profound interrogation of Africa in general and as a sign in modern formulations of knowledge.

The elusive metropolis is juxtaposed with the global city paradigm's (see Sassen, 2001) emphasis on economic and technological global integration. The global city paradigm could be viewed as a highly functionalist reading of the city, as well as ignoring the specificity of cities of the global south. An analytically richer notion of the global city would account for what Appadurai (1996) describes as urban life that are now constituted by "complex, overlapping, disjunctive, order of multiple centres, peripheries, and scapes of various scales, moving at various speeds" (p.32). Mbembe and Nuttall (2008, p. 3) point out that the major cities of the global South share many of the characteristics of northern cities but that ways of seeing and reading African cities, for example, are still dominated by the metanarratives of urbanization, modernization, and crisis. They call for an analytical frame that captures the "fracturing, colliding and splintered orders of urban life" (p. 5), in other words, views that move beyond the misery associated with urban poverty, to richer, more nuanced accounts of the uncertain, spectral and informal quality of life, understood as elusive yet momentarily 'mappable.' Beyond the fact of urban poverty, this type of analysis is interested in the complex ways the 'terms of recognition'—the ability and capacity of the poor to exercise their voice is pursued and substantiated (see Appadurai, 2004). The elusive African metropolis exists beyond its architecture where,

Simple material infrastructures and technologies, as well as their dysfunction and breakdown, thus create, define, and transform new sites of transportation, new configurations of entangled spatialities, new public spaces of work and relaxation, new itinerancies and clusters of relations. The main infrastructural unit or building block is the human body. (Mbembe & Nuttall, 2008, p. 71)

Similarly, the position I develop here is contrasted with predominant accounts of a sociology of education and knowledge that is inscribed with functionalist epistemologies. The analytical task is to present a view of the socialities associated with schools in the post-apartheid city, founded on a complex reading of urban subject making. My focus is on what Appadurai refers to as a 'cultural economy' (1996, p. 37) associated with unfolding urban spaces and the formative role of schooling processes in them.

Mine is an attempt to bring those urban post-apartheid citizens into view who live below the city's normative lines, planned pathways and built architectures. They live in the city's shadows, as old and newer urban residents in sprawling urban townships and shacklands, and some as refugees in squalid infrastructures in

run-down parts of the inner city. They are mostly out of sight of the city's planning intent and normative consciousness. The children of the black working classes and unemployed poor go to great lengths to access what they perceive as better schools across the city, where they end up receiving a modernist curriculum that strips them of their access to their cultural knowledge and social survival epistemologies, on the assumption that modern middle-class education is what will emancipate them from their parochial cultural identifications. The assumption of cultural assimilation is hard at work in the urban post-apartheid school, albeit with multicultural genuflection to the newer incoming kids' backgrounds. Assimilationist curriculum practices are alive in the city's classrooms, which ostensibly provide the vehicle for their induction into modern life.

My focus is on the subjective processes of kids and families who make their school choices in the light of their physical extensions across the city: How do they live their choices? How are their subjectivities formed? How do they work with their extant knowledges as they access the formal codes of the school? And how do they work with their inclusions and co-optations into the formal registers of their schools?

Schools deny them any recognition of their physical and ontological worlds and their epistemic forms, instead inducting them into a one-dimensional modern racial-colonial canon. I favor an intermediate epistemological position that works beyond the binary of the formal vertical line, the narrow formal coda, or the one-dimensional modernist knowledge code currently informing schooling in the post-apartheid city. While the school knowledge code is not entirely driven by the trope of social difference (see Soudien, 2011), I would suggest that this code in South African curriculum debates is wrapped up in: (1) discursive framings of hegemonic school curriculum debates and policy reforms; (2) the myopia of what in this country is described as the "school fix-it agenda" in response to the dismal learning achievement of the majority of Black kids in South Africa—an agenda that narrowly concentrates on improving school quality without providing a basis for troubling the discursive productions that the implied school processes entrench; and (3) the historiography of educational academic work that circulates around a narrow functionalist posture that focuses primarily on what's wrong with the learning of poor Black kids and on the teaching pedagogies of their teachers. These tropes collectively translate into unproblematic pedagogical approaches that conceptualize student learning as a problem in isolation, understood apart from the reconfiguring social forms that swirl around it. The socio-cultural forms of the Black working and urban poor, coupled with the everyday deployment of their cultural knowledges, what I call the counter-normative epistemic forms of the urban underside, are not given curricular currency.

Such a deficit approach to curriculum and knowledge embeds a modernist colonial and racial teleology. It embellishes the city's colonial, racial modernist form, while simultaneously hiding its productive capacity, making race continue to live an

unseemly life, invisible to the eye, but operating beneath the surface. Commenting on the pervasiveness of race as productive social articulator, Goldberg (2009) suggests that, "Much like a shroud in its ghostly appearance, race still exercises a magnetism, modes of referentiality and divisive effects, if now informalized and sublimated into the body politic, just as it is shrugged off" (p. 311). Goldberg argues that with the secularization of race, the language of racial order disappears even if its outlines and impressions, its structural imprint and threats continue to have social force.

The structural informalities of society continue to embed its racial legacy. I would suggest that the changing schooling landscape in the post-apartheid city provides a key articulating platform for the ways in which these continuing informalities, in 'post-racial' context, play out. My key argument is the suggestion that these informalities work way beyond what a racial or modernist trope can recognize or make visible. It is in the interstices of the cracks, fissures, and leaks of urban textualities that newer referential modes are productive, made up of urban self-writing governmental processes, which I will later suggest are brought about by young people who put their bodies on the line as they access the city's schools.

The 'Visibly Invisible' Mobile School Subject

Making visible the mobile school-going subject that moves below the city's radar is meant as a challenge to the one-dimensional understandings of schooling and its subjective entailments. The dominant version of the educational subject in the city and its attendant knowledge form is not seen in the light of a radically altered social form, whose grasping requires one to see the link between the social unfolding and the curricular and knowledge forms. Two tropes reflect this dominant view: those that advocate fixing schools as transmitters of formal knowledge codes and those that advocate for an equity-informed schooling policy reform platform. Both leave the hegemonic knowledge and curriculum code untroubled. Induction into formal school knowledge is presented as a kind of moral commitment to providing kids access to middle-class knowledge and upward mobility. For both of these tropes the radically transforming social (and epistemological) form of schooling and education more generally are swept off the table. Both suffer from a kind of historical evisceration, in support of a forward-looking teleological commitment to functional educational and social improvement.

As Archer (2004) suggests, such a view embeds an entirely modernist view of the world. As a social realist and pragmatist philosopher, Archer (2004) suggests, "courses of (human) action are produced through the *reflexive deliberations* [italics added] of subjects who *subjectively* [italics added] determine their practical projects in relation to their *objective* [italics added] circumstances" (p. 17). It is the relationship between the subjective and objective that is important for my argument here. Archer's work opens out the possibility of viewing the imbrications of the educational, curricular and epistemological terrain of subject formation,

in my case in a post-racial urban context. Archer provides for an understanding of the emergence of an architectonic map of those for whom access to the city's commercial and educational landscape remains formally closed, and for whom the city's schools represent a chimera, where, in their exercise of school choice, they put body and soul on the line to access its empty and emptying promises, on an empty promissory note, based on the 'politics of aspiration.' This happens in urban spaces that are being worked over by a neoliberal reconfiguration, where state withdrawal from social welfare provision and from acting as a buffer, has pitted the bodies of people in the direct firing line of an exclusionary school choice market, which is an example of 'individual responsibilization' in contingent neoliberal city space (Gulson & Fataar, 2011). Gulson (2011) explains, "Aspirations and responsibilities circulate as part of education markets in inner city areas; and the racialization of desires and concerns can be diluted to, for example, discourses of responsible, rational parenting" (p. 99). In other words, the responsibility for social and welfare related services, including education, are transferred onto the individual, families and communities. Young people have to figure out their aspirational maps based on what neoliberal discourses make available what is knowable and possible, allowing "desiring neoliberal subjects to gloss over race and racism, by recourse to the realm of personal preference" (p. 99).

The focus is on those city kids who cultivate their aspirations in the thickness of social life that is variously described as 'bare' (Comaroff, p. 12), and 'miserable urban life' or 'intensifying immiseration' (Simone, 2008, p. 89), where cities no longer offer poor people the prospect of improving their livelihoods or modern ways of life. The growing distance that emerges between how urban Africans actually live, on the one hand, and the normative trajectories of urbanization and public life, on the other, can constitute new fields of economic action (p. 89). This distancing can lead to the disarticulation of coherent urban space, where people have to make what they can out of bare life. Simone describes this as a situation where people throw "their intensifying particularisms—of identity, location, destination and livelihood—into the fray, (and) urban residents generate a sense of unaccountable movement that might remain geographically circumscribed or travel great distances (Simone, 2008, p. 89).

In other words, what is crucial to understand is the performance of subjectivity on the move, as I argue, on the basis of navigational maps that are constructed 'as you go,' based on formal destinations somewhat in sight, only somewhat, but with end destinies largely unknown, even unknowable. Clarity of end goals is not the key to subjective construction. It is not the clarity about where one ends up that motivates school aspirants, but the reaching out for a destination whose route remains unclear and tenuous. Investing in the 'destination,' however tenuous, serves as a motivation for remaining en route and it is the remaining en route that matters. Herein resides the 'banality' and utter hopefulness of the investment. The hope invested in becoming a recognized urban citizen—children are 'on the move,'

across borders, bridges, and highways, under subways, on trains, taxis, and buses—provide the motive force for investments in these children's urban making.

This brings the theorization of space, or 'lived space' (see Lefebvre, 1991), into view. People's subjectivities are shaped in dynamic interaction with the reconfiguring physical landscape. This can be understood analytically as the outcome of a spatial dialectic: the imbrications of physical or material space, representational space, and spatial representation (or lived space). 'Lived space' (or social space, relational space, or spatiality) refers to how people live in particular sites, how they are wired into their geography, and how they transcend this geography. Lived space focuses on what people become when engaging their geographies, appropriating space and inventing new practices. In their book, *Mapping the Subject*, Pile and Thrift (1995) explain that mappings of subjectivity or 'subject becoming' need to be drawn in ways that are capable of elucidating the fixity and fluidity, the ambivalence and ambiguity, the transparency and opacity, and the surface and the depth of the mapped subject. It is out of a complex, fluid, open, and layered lived experience that these school-going kids encounter their subjection and subject becoming. People's educational choices, for example, are invested with readings that draw on notions of the rapidly changing city and the spatial provenance they expect their choices to provide. What one wants to capture is the splintering quality of the metropolitan experience itself. Schooling subjectivities, constructed in motion, involve complex readings and navigations of the city's environs, often by children who have to travel long distances in precarious transport arrangements.

With regard to the structural outlines of the subjective formations associated with school life in the post-apartheid city, I argue that lived space has been the key articulator or organiser of these newer school subjectivities in the city. The rigid, racialised apartheid city grid has been fundamentally rearranged by families and increasingly mostly children, who make decisions on their own over their schools of choice. While school kids by and large still live in racialised pockets in the city, their school choices have increasingly been transacted across the city. Students have either burst out of racialised township spaces to attend remoter schools in adjacent townships, suburbs or the inner city, or they have moved to schools on the other side of the township. They have been developing a sense of citizenship rooted in the space of the city on the move, while becoming affectively distanced from their place of living to which they return every day.

Students have moved across the apartheid-generated city grid to access schools elsewhere, away from their homes. They do this on the basis of careful readings of the social-spatial attributions of the schools close by. The empirical evidence suggests that close to 50% of school children in cities choose to go to schools in remoter locations (see Lemon & Battersby-Lennard, 2010). They have come to understand that the school close by has to be avoided, trapped as it is in place and devoid of aspirational capital.

Facilitated by a decentralised state governance model, schools have developed

methods to preserve and induct their students into their hegemonic identities. Examples of such exclusionary school practices are: (1) the non-racism by stealth at the former coloured middle-class schools, involving, for example, discriminatory social practices among different black groups; (2) the linguistic apartheid at working-class schools in coloured townships; (3) the assimilation of incoming children into the hegemonic cultures of suburban schools; and (4) the exclusion practices that confront the recalcitrant children at the functional black township schools (see Fataar, 2009). What is apparent is that the city's schools, their different identification articulations notwithstanding, have evolved cultures of inclusion and exclusion, buttressed by their specific hegemonic ways of being.

Given this structurally rearranged city school landscape, what is important to consider is how these aspirational students construct their subjectivities as they move across the city to access their schooling. How do they come into subjective consciousness? How do they comport themselves as they burst out of their immediate surrounds and move into an unknown metropolitan order, with far-off hopes and dreams? How do they embody the routes, routines, repertoires and performances of their becoming as they access their education? How do they become city subjects as they emerge from their informalized, anti-aspirational, traumatized spatialities? And what can we learn about the way the city and its schools now work to include these newer 'bodies on the move and on the make,' while simultaneously blocking off the ontologies of these subjective flows from emerging out of the shadows and co-constructing the post-apartheid city's metropolitan imagination?

Spatialized Youth Bodily Carvings

Articulated in space, youth bodies are carved out of complex processes that involve their physical mobility as they move across the city in search of functioning modern schooling, the embodiments they take on in their uneven spatial terrains, and their classification struggles (working with their uneven knowledge dispositions) as they open a path into their urban becoming. They adopt a type of multi-sited adaptive literacy as they daily navigate various spatialities—surviving in their ephemeral and impoverished domestic spaces, the mobile and unsafe spaces of their travel and transport arrangements, and the dissonant spatiality of their assimilation-orientated schools that fail to recognize their complex subjective dynamics. They use their bodies as a kind of human infrastructure as they establish their presence in the city. Simone (2008) explains that the notion of “people as infrastructure” captures the idea of “incessantly flexible, mobile, and provisional intersections of residents that operate without clearly delineated notions of how the city is to be inhabited and used” (p. 68). These intersections or conjunctions become a kind of infrastructure, a platform for reproducing life in the city out of “complex combinations of objects, spaces, people and practices” (p. 69). Out of these types of social practices emerge a kind of regularity capable of anchoring these mobile students' lives. While radically open,

these practices are transacted in the light of various threats of physical violence, especially for girls (see Lancaster, 2011). These children nonetheless succeed in opening a viable path into their schooling careers.

Their spatial consciousness is based on acute readings of what type of behavior is expected of them in each space. They adapt to these expectations, sometimes with great difficulty, on an understanding of the type of bodily comportment required. They take on a type of dual identity based on the desire to fit into their shifting environments. In their township spaces they try to live below the radar by fitting in with peer-group activity, which works against their appearing too strange, thereby avoiding verbal or physical recrimination. In the taxi, train and/or bus on the way to school they adopt an appropriate body language that aids their safe travel, and they work hard to fit into the culture of assimilation of their schools.

Bodily discipline and appropriate comporting seem to characterize their successful navigation across these different worlds. Based on interviews and observing them in these spaces, I deduced that they have an acute understanding of the dominant discourses of each space. They figure out the appropriate behavior that would enable them to survive in these spaces. For example, feigning obliviousness to the exclusionary discourses at their school is adopted as a bodily tactic deployed to access the school's formal educational goods. Similarly, smoking or flirting on a taxi or adopting a specific bodily style over the weekend in the township is used as a means of fitting into the expectations of those spaces. Strategic readings, street-smart literacies and tactical deployment of appropriate behavior constitute the lineaments of their subject making, in effect securing them access to the city. This notion of tactics operating at the interstices of strategic constraints is a recurring theme in the work of Michael de Certeau (1984, pp. 29-44). His work allows one to understand how these children's subject making arises from everyday practices and tactics based on improvisation and opportunism that combine disparate resources and material to gain momentary advantage. It is the daily accumulation and repetition of such practices that secure them viable school going experiences in the post-apartheid city.

Conclusion

The children's active bodily adaptations are thus central to their urban subject making. They carve out complex bodily orientations to navigate materially deprived urban spaces, by adopting a range of tactics, including resistance, strategic compliance, acting tough, and dressing and behaving with calculated sensibility. They establish their everyday bodily practices on the move across the city, developing acute readings of the expectations of each space that they enter and exit daily, including their schools. They acquire highly sophisticated street literacies that inform their readings of these spaces, enabling them to survive, adapt, and access the requisite cultural capital to get on.

It is important to note that these flexible and disciplining configurations are pursued not in some essential contrast to more formal priorities and routines in the city, although they perceptibly are, but as specific routes to a kind of stability and regularity that poor urbanites have always attempted to realise (see Simone, 2008). This brings me back to the link between the cityscape and the dominant discourses of the school. There seems to be a widely unacknowledged formative relationship between different urban discourses: the planned and the providential, the informal routes of the urban poor and the formal accessibilities of the middle classes, the exclusions of the discourses of the urban underside and the predominance of middle-class 'ways of knowing.' These operate in parallel. The extant formal discourses of the city are oblivious to the ontological presence of the Black Other. The latter's precarious subjections in the city remain an invisible presence. Schooling in the city plays a largely reproductive role in circulating this parallel message—that is, it circulates an exclusive focus on the narrow epistemological code that prevents the ontologies and knowledges of the city's poor and Black majority from entering the formal public domain. Despite the complex subject-making processes at play, a narrow epistemological orientation remains the hegemonic trope in the post-apartheid city and its schools.

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