



# ‘This country beyond the township’: Race, class and higher education mobilities in the post-apartheid city

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the impact of educational mobilities on the lives of university students from an urban working-class township in South Africa. In highly unequal urban contexts, these mobilities provide access to valuable material resources and engender subjective transformations that facilitate access to higher education spaces. Based on fieldwork with students from Khayelitsha, a black urban township in Cape Town, it argues that these mobilities are shaped histories of racial segregation, demands of globalizing labour markets, and students’ personal readings of changing urban environments. Drawing on the concept of mobility capital, the paper suggests that even as these movements enable access to educational opportunities, they do not automatically generate the forms of capital required for social mobility. While students used mobilities to access higher education, they struggled to develop the social networks, embodied dispositions, language skills and cultural competencies that would provide social advantage. Rather, their experiences on campus reveal how mobility capital is structured by material and symbolic inequalities, which are frequently alienating and exclusionary. Finally, the paper emphasizes the importance of everyday movements and attachments between home and university spaces to the formation of student identities.

## 1. Introduction

South Africa, like many countries across the Global South, has witnessed rapid increases in higher education enrolments over the last two decades (Calderon, 2018; Mohamedbhai, 2008). Government support for educational massification alongside labour market restructuring has raised demands for qualifications, resulting in a doubling of higher education enrolments since the end of apartheid in 1994 (CHE, 2017). These increases occur in landscapes marked by apartheid-era patterns of racialized inequality and new forms of socio-spatial exclusion. Poverty remains racialized and gendered, with a strong spatial dimension, concentrated in rural areas and peri-urban townships (World Bank Group, 2018). These inequalities have a significant impact on how students access higher education, which institutions they are able to access, and whether they are able to complete their degrees. As educational researchers have shown, access to better quality schooling, typically outside working-class neighbourhoods, provides one of the few ways of securing access to university and professional labour markets (Hunter, 2015, 2019; Chetty, 2014; Motala and Vally, 2010; Bhorat et al., 2010). Pursuing social mobility then, often rests on the ability to move across

divided cities in the pursuit of educational resources and opportunities. While these mobilities are central to the process of post-apartheid class formation, limited attention has been paid to their subjective impacts on students’ educational identities, particularly in higher education environments.

This article examines students’ experiences of higher education mobility across South Africa’s divided cities. Based on interviews with university students from a black working-class urban township in Cape Town, it argues that mobilities provide access to valuable educational resources, which, in turn, shape educational identities and decisions. These educational mobilities in South Africa are complex, shaped by legacies of apartheid planning, changing patterns of urban development, labour market restructuring, and the rapid growth of black urban middle class. While there has been considerable attention paid to schooling mobilities in South Africa, higher education mobilities have received more limited attention (Fataar, 2009, 2007; Hunter, 2019, 2017; McKay, 2019). Drawing on the concept of ‘mobility capital,’ I describe how movements across divided urban landscapes facilitate access to resources, skills, and networks that can provide pathways into higher education. By detailing the on-campus experiences of township students,

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I also reveal the challenges involved in converting these resources into capitals which may facilitate social mobility. While higher education institutions in South Africa have undergone significant transformation, life on campus remains structured by apartheid's racial past, producing racialized subjectivities and practices among students (Walker, 2005). Black students from working class townships attending historically white institutions struggled to embody identities separate from their lives in the township. The process of 'fitting in' was frequently a discomfiting experience, and a reminder of racialized exclusions and poverty that characterized their upbringing.

Geographers have expressed considerable interest in the relationship between educational mobility and the formation of student identities. The internationalization of higher education in particular has generated valuable research on the social and cultural capital students acquire by becoming internationally mobile. This literature describes the role of these capitals in maintaining and facilitating social mobility in global labour markets (Brooks and Waters, 2011; Murphy-Lejeune, 2007; Waters and Leung, 2013). Yet a far higher proportion of students attend higher education institutions closer to home, and scholars have noted the importance of these local and everyday mobilities to students' lives and identities (Finn, 2017; Finn and Holton, 2019; Holton, 2015). Drawing on research with university students in South Africa, this article examines the impact of these mobilities across urban landscapes characterized by stark spatial and racial inequalities. In South African cities, educational mobilities are structured by segregationist histories which divided schools and neighbourhoods by 'racial group.' Apartheid's spatial logic was also an attempt at limiting the social mobility of Black South Africans by restricting access to educational institutions, residential areas, and jobs reserved for whites. In the post-apartheid period, these histories continue to structure urban mobilities, with work and education opportunities often located far from Black, working-class communities. The end of apartheid, and the significant rise in unemployment, has sparked growing demand for credentials which for many provide one of the only pathways out of poverty (Seekings and Nattrass 2008). As such, the university provides a valuable site to explore how the transformation and continuity of apartheid's racial practices has affected young people's identities (Walker 2005; Soudien 2001, 2004).

### 1.1. Education, Mobility and Capital

As a concept, mobility bridges the social and the spatial, revealing the relationship between physical movement and the power structures of race, class, sexuality, and gender. Mobility has been a key focus of youth researchers, who have mapped young people's differential experiences of urban space and analyzed how youth perceive and navigate urban environments. (Dillabough and Kennelly, 2010; Hopkins, 2013; Worth, 2014). In African cities, researchers have focused on how neoliberal policies have privatized public spaces and restricted young peoples' movements, how unemployment has delayed transitions to adulthood, and how 'idle youth' are increasingly criminalized by the state (Diouf, 2003; Honwana, 2012; Langevang, 2008; Mains, 2007; Ya'u, 2000). In South Africa, greater freedom of movement in the post-apartheid period has been accompanied by new limitations, such as high transport costs, the threat of gendered violence, securitized urban development, and long-term unemployment (Lee, 2004; Porter et al., 2017; Van Blerk, 2013; Webb, 2021b). Understanding how and why young people move and the obstacles they encounter can therefore deepen our understanding of the complex relationalities of urban mobility and its effect on identity formation (Skelton, 2013: 470). As urban scholars have suggested, engaging with people's everyday movements can help us better understand the ordinary practices of city making, including how people secure livelihoods, access resources and form identities (Parnell and Robinson, 2012; Pieterse, 2008; Simone, 2010, 2004).

One of the primary ways that youth become mobile is through the

pursuit of education outside their neighbourhood, city, or country. Among geographers, there has been a significant focus on educational mobilities, particularly due to the rapid growth in international enrolments in higher education. Studies of international student mobility have revealed that becoming mobile can result in the accumulation of valuable forms of social and cultural capital which ultimately improve employability (Brooks and Waters, 2011; Collins, 2008; Murphy-Lejeune, 2007; Waters, 2006). Scholars have also revealed how these mobilities give rise new 'imaginative geographies' and cultures of higher education that shape youth cultures, identities and perceptions of place (Kölbel, 2020; Beech, 2015, 2014). Wealthier students who are able to travel internationally for university are often able to distinguish themselves in labour markets by acquiring valuable social connections, cultural tastes, and linguistic abilities (Waters, 2012; Brooks, Waters and Pimlott-Wilson, 2012). First-generation and working-class students, meanwhile, often access university closer to home and frequently experience difficulty 'fitting in' (Christie, 2007; Crozier et al., 2008). Scholars have troubled this focus on mobility and fixity, revealing how students' expectations of mobility often conflict with financial worries and desires to maintain local and familial connections (Holdsworth, 2009). Finn (2017: 744) argues that im/mobility oversimplifies the classed nature of education choices, reducing it to who is able to become internationally mobile, and "neglecting the significance of everyday encounters that constitute important affective experiences and emerge out of complex relational negotiations within personal networks."

Central to much of this scholarship is how educational mobility facilitates the acquisition of certain non-economic skills, resources, and cultural dispositions (Brooks and Waters, 2011; Murphy-Lejeune, 2007; Waters and Leung, 2013; Waters, 2006). Drawing from Bourdieu's (1984, 1990, 1991) work on capitals—the economic, social, and cultural resources that individuals may possess or accumulate and use to maintain or improve their social position—Murphy-Lejeune (2007, 2017) develops the idea of 'mobility capital' to describe those skills and experiences that enhance individuals social standing through the richness of international experience. Through international travel, wealthy students are able to acquire linguistic competencies, personality traits, and an understanding of cultural differences that are transferable to life and livelihoods beyond the university. Building on the concept, Moret (2018, 99) emphasizes that mobility is not something people do, "but a series of experiences and skills that people accumulate which they may transform into a type of capital" (Moret, 2018, 99). For Moret (2018) simply becoming mobile is not a capital in the sense that Bourdieu (1984, 1990) described it. Rather, it provides access to resources which, over time, may allow individuals to improve their social position. Here we might imagine the differences between, for example, highly mobile temporary foreign workers who acquire international experience and language skills and yet lack pathways toward residency and income security, and international students who acquire foreign credentials, language abilities, and work experience and can translate these into more secure futures. In short, the ability to convert mobility into capitals which enable social mobility is affected by intersecting forms of social oppression, from race to immigration status to gender.

In South Africa, the desegregation of schooling has led to significant movement of students from black urban townships to historically white and Indian schools elsewhere (De Kadt, 2011; Gulson and Fataar, 2011; Hunter, 2019; McKay, 2019). Hunter's (2019, 2016, 2015, 2010) detailed research on educational mobilities in Durban has shown that these are not only aimed at accessing better quality schools, but valuable forms of social and cultural capital associated with formerly white institutions—forms of spoken English, attitudes, and social network—that provide opportunities for social mobility. Similarly, Fataar's (2009) work on educational mobilities in Cape Town suggests that schooling outside the township is seen, "as crucial [in] cultivating the necessary aspirant dispositions that will allow entry into formal middle-class employment and lifestyles" (Fataar 2009, 3). Higher education admissions tend to reflect and reinforce these schooling inequalities, with

qualifications from historically white universities, now elite research institutions, highly prized by employers (Graham et al., 2019; Rogan and Reynolds 2016; Pauw et al., 2006).

The South African context reveals how ‘mobility capital’ is structured by histories of racial segregation and ongoing socio-spatial inequalities. Simply becoming mobile is insufficient; what is required are mobilities which enable access to material and symbolic resources that provide forms of distinction in professionalizing and globalized labour markets. As Moret (2018) has demonstrated through his work on Somali migrants in Europe, mobilities are critical in securing access to resources (education, language skills, cultural competencies), but translating these resources into social mobility is a more fraught process. As we shall see, becoming mobile in the post-apartheid city is critical in avoiding unemployment and precarity in the township, but converting these resources into networks, jobs, and, ultimately, money was considerably more challenging.

## 2. Methods

Research for this article was carried out between 2016 and 2017, with a group of 41 university students from Khayelitsha township in Cape Town enrolled at three different higher education institutions. All participants were between the ages of 18 and 21. The majority of participants (60%) were enrolled at the University of Cape Town, a formerly white university, while 23% were enrolled at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), an institution formed through the merger of formerly white and a historically coloured technical colleges, and 17% were enrolled at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), a formerly coloured university. Of the sample group, 56% were male and 44% female, and the majority (64%) were the first in their family to attend any higher education institution. A total of 74 interviews were conducted with members of the sample group, including one focus group with an additional 20 students. Some students were interviewed on multiple occasions and in multiple sites (on campus or in the township) and these were often accompanied by interviews with former teachers and family members. Interviews with individuals provided richer qualitative data on students’ educational histories and relations with family members in the township. Students were recruited with the help of staff at a tutoring and mentorship program run by the University of Cape Town—all participants had been enrolled in the program from grades 10–12. The program, was aimed at addressing the under-representation of school learners from township high schools in higher education, describing itself as “a holistic initiative that builds intellectual, social and cultural capital.” Interviews and focus groups were semi-structured and explored students’ experiences in the program, experiences during high school, adapting to campus life, and household work and education histories.

All students in this sample group were enrolled for all or part of their high school years (Grade 8–12) at a high school in Khayelitsha. In some ways, this makes them a non-typical sample group, as they did not travel outside the township to access higher quality secondary schooling. However, this also provides unique insights into the complex navigations and strategies that students in township high schools develop to access higher education opportunities. This can help us better understand young people’s own agency in making educational decisions rather than reducing their schooling histories to parental decisions alone. Many of the interviews I conducted occurred against the backdrop of student protests that occurred on university campuses across South Africa between 2015 and 17. Dubbed the #FeesMustFall movement, these protests focused on rising fee costs amidst a range of issues, from outsourcing of campus cleaning staff to racism on campus (Booyesen 2017). Rather than disruptive to the research process, these events provided opportunities to discuss issues of race, class, and space on campus, and how these were interpreted and contested by black students. My positionality as a white, western-based, researcher generated certain limitations in conducting interviews and developing rapport

with participants. I sought to address this, in part, by spending significant time in Khayelitsha, interviewing students on multiple occasions, and getting to know their communities and families.

I use ‘student’ to describe participants in this study as interviews revolved largely around their educational identities and experiences. However, it is worth noting that there is some slippage between the category of student and youth in South Africa. Youth, officially defined, fall between the ages of 15 and 34. However, ‘youth’ also has political connotations. As scholars have noted, through the anti-apartheid protests of the 1980 s, youth came to be associated with protest politics, and cultures of township resistance (Marks 2001; Seekings and Everatt 1994).

### 2.1. The Township and the Global City

Contemporary educational mobilities in South African cities are the product of apartheid-era racist social engineering policies and the rapid marketization of education in the post-apartheid period. In Cape Town, pass laws were in place from the eighteenth century, zoning regulations demarcated residency specific to racial groups, and labour preference policies were aimed at discouraging black urban settlement (Western, 1981). Despite this, many black families defied influx urban control policies and moved to the peripheries of cities in response to rising demand for industrial workers (Lemon, 1991; Makhulu, 2015). My research site, Khayelitsha, was produced by these Manichean spatial ambitions and the state’s failure to adequately enforce them. Founded in 1983, the township was designed as an ‘urban homeland,’ for the city’s growing number of black residents (Dewar and Watson, 1984). Limited employment opportunities were created in the township as residents were expected to commute to work in industrial zones and white suburbs. Designed to host 2,500 families, today the township is home to well over 400,000 people with a growing number residing in informal settlements and backyard shacks (Census, 2011). The township is characterized by high rates of unemployment, informality and poverty, with somewhere between 32% and 46% of households falling below the country’s food poverty line (Seekings, 2013). The expanded unemployment rate for adults aged 20–59 in the township is 46%, and among men and women in their 20 s it is 52% (Ibid., 15).

Nearly four decades after it was founded, Khayelitsha remains a largely dormitory neighbourhood. Each morning minibus taxis and busses stream from the township, carrying residents to workplaces and schools outside its boundaries. Spatial development in Cape Town has failed to address the legacies of apartheid planning (Sinclair-Smith and Turok, 2012). Private sector investment remains concentrated in the CBD, which, together with northern and southern suburbs, houses only 37 per cent of the population, but contains over 80 per cent of all jobs (Turok, 2001, 2352). As a result, those living in Khayelitsha and its surrounds spend a significant portion of their income on transportation costs (Mlatsheni and Rospabe, 2002; Rospabe and Selod, 2006).

While middle income neighbourhoods have become more racially diverse, townships on the urban periphery continue to experience high rates of poverty, unemployment, and struggles over access to housing and basic services (Crankshaw, 2012; Levenson, 2018; McFarlane and Silver, 2017). In an overview of thirty years of spatial change in the city, Visser and Horn (2021) suggest that more important than distance from employment in Cape Town is that fact that it is an ‘economy apart.’ Economic growth has been driven by capital intensive tertiary sectors (insurance, real estate, finance, and tourism) which demand higher skilled workers—this excludes many of the newly urbanized population.

How young people move in South Africa’s cities is deeply affected by these histories of racial segregation as well as the rapid social, economic, and cultural changes of the post-apartheid period. While it has made progress in housing and service delivery, a largely pro-growth agenda dominates urban planning in Cape Town (McDonald, 2012; McFarlane and Silver, 2017; Visser and Horn, 2021). This is evident in the growth of privatized retail and commercial spaces, gated communities, and

securitized business improvement zones (McDonald, 2012; Mirafitab, 2007, 2004; Van Blerk, 2013) The development of Century City, for example, a mall and gated suburb, is emblematic of the enclave urbanism present in other cities across the country (Visser and Horn, 2021). Exclusionary forms of urban development have been accompanied by significant cultural changes that have affected urban environments, notably the growth of luxury shopping malls, international sporting and cultural events, and tourist infrastructure. Young South Africans exist between these worlds of conspicuous consumption and everyday struggles over poverty and hunger (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001). Space is read relationally, as the hardships of life in the townships are read against highway billboards for luxury cars and watches.

## 2.2. Educational Mobilities across a Divided City

From grades 10 through 12, my research participants attended a tutoring and mentorship program run by a local university. Weekend classes offered instruction in high school subject areas, assistance with assignments, and exam preparation. Participants noted the practical benefits of these classes, but most recalled the transformative impact of the 'June Holiday camps' where they would spend a week on the University of Cape Town campus. For the vast majority, this was the first time they had visited a university and spent time in the affluent, and still predominantly white, southern suburbs. In this section, I describe how this experience shaped their aspirations toward higher education and how it contrasted with their lives and experiences in the township.

Among participants, leaving the township and going to university was widely seen as the only route toward a better life for themselves and their families. One participant put it rather bluntly: "You don't go to school because you want to study... You go to school because you want to fix the problems at home." As Swartz (2010) has argued, education provides a critical source of hope for many young South Africans. Through it they develop aspirations that extend beyond the constraints of the township and allow them to imagine alternate futures in which they are middle class and able to escape the fixity of township life. For Zanele, the camps provided her with material resources and confidence to apply to university.

In the township we're not exposed, so when we get to varsity that's where you get exposed to what is this country beyond the township... So we'd go to campus and do workshops there, improving our self-esteem, standing in front of people, being able to communicate with different people and not be shy. So, we weren't scared to apply to places like UCT.

For Zanele, the camps were psychologically transformative, opening up new imaginative possibilities and providing her with the confidence to imagine herself in the university environment. Andile contrasted the camps with his life in the township, where finding time and space to study was challenging, and one did not see a clear route to university.

I would say Khayelitsha, ya it is a different environment. Mostly there, well you don't have role models there, and it causes many young people to do things in a way that doesn't let them succeed. In Khayelitsha most of the time there are parties there and gangsters. So, we grew up seeing things like that. Growing up in that environment causes you to think that is the only right thing to do.

Participants emphasized that the camps raised their educational aspirations, exposing them to lifestyles, amenities, and everyday comforts that they did not enjoy back home.

Siya: I could say that it was some kind of good exposure because like it showed you another life. There [in Khayelitsha] you are freezing, sleeping at 3o'clock because of the cold and then when you come here you see these comfortable beds and sleeping alone, grass is all over the lawn. So, you see you, are exposed to another nature. Seeing that motivated me.

In his descriptions of the program, Siya contrasted the challenges of everyday life in the township to the comforts of student life on campus. Moving from one space to another revealed, as he put it, a different *nature*, or a radically different side of the city than the one he usually interacted with. In short, both the physical space of the campus and its symbolic meanings allowed students to develop alternate readings of the city and their place within it. Prior to the camps, for example, Siya thought of the city in terms of where he 'belonged.' "You know there are some places that you don't belong in Cape Town," he reflected, "UCT is one. It wasn't part of my dreams."

In his work on educational mobilities in Cape Town, Fataar (2009: 11) describes the "anti-aspirational geographies" of township life. Urban townships like Khayelitsha were designed as dormitory areas, constructed to meet capital's labour demands, but "never meant to be places of metropolitan imaginativeness," as they were designed as spaces of control which, "reproduced a spatially limited consciousness" (Ibid). This is reflected in students' description of how the culture of the township limited their educational aspirations and how this changed after spending time on a university campus. As Akona described it: "The youth think our backgrounds define or determine us... so the program kind of erased all of that, like it removed that heaviness, that burden that was given onto us." Young black South Africans' imaginations have been deeply affected by the socio-economic changes of the post-apartheid period, most notably the opportunities provided by expanded education opportunities and affirmative action hiring policies that have given rise to the formation of a sizeable black middle class (Soudien, 2003; Southall, 2016). Massive demand for higher education qualifications is, in no small part, due to the fact that degree graduates face an 8% chance of unemployment compared to the 55% chance faced by high school graduates (Van der Berg and Van Broekhuizen, 2012). Higher education therefore provides the possibility of joining this process of class mobility, and, as Soudien (2006: 25) puts it, provides "relief from the claustrophobia of the township."

Participant's sense of self was deeply affected by these mobilities across the city. As researchers have noted, schooling mobilities outside the township—often to formerly white schools—are one of the strategies that township families use to access better quality education and pursue intergenerational social mobility (Hunter, 2017, 2019). But not every family is able to afford this type of mobility as tuition and transport costs are often prohibitive. In my research I noticed another phenomenon in which youth sought access to educational resources and supports within the township. Akona described this as, "hustling... the things that we young people do on a daily basis to change our lives. We can't be sitting at home!" This involved frequent movement between high schools that were seen as better quality (usually determined by grade 12 pass rates) and jockeying for access to tutoring and mentorship programs offered by universities and NGOs in the township. One participant, for example, moved through three different high schools, finally securing a scholarship at a private high school in the township known for its high pass rate. She used these connections, and her involvement in the tutoring program to secure a range of university entrance scholarships. In other cases, youth would visit university campuses over weekends and holidays, interacting with peers studying at university in order to gain insights into campus life. They developed inventive strategies to access tutoring for exams, guidance through the application process, scholarship support, and funding to pay for registration costs. These provided them with many of the practical skills needed to secure university entrance but also allowed them to imagine themselves attending university.

Educational mobilities in the post-apartheid city are structured by material and symbolic inequalities. The marketization of schooling in the post-apartheid context has raised the prestige of formerly white schools, which are seen as reservoirs of valuable cultural and social capital (Gulson and Fataar, 2011; Hunter, 2019; McKay, 2019). Similarly, higher education transformation allowed formerly white institutions to become 'world class' research institutions, buffered by



generous endowments and research funding, while historically black, coloured, and Indian universities have struggled with high rates of student debt and ailing infrastructure (Cooper 2015; Swartz et al., 2018). Unsurprisingly, historically white institutions are seen as conveying markers of social distinction. Siya used a telling metaphor to describe the differences between institutions.

So, let me give an example, you know Woolworths? Well, it's like UCT is Woolworths and others are like going to Shoprite. Ya *bra*<sup>1</sup>, so my research shows that, once you graduate from UCT you will be internationally recognized. When you study at other universities, it's like you only belong to South Africa, it's like you have few chances to work in other parts of the world.

For Siya, UCT is the educational equivalent of South Africa's high-end grocery chain Woolworths, which is widely seen as both an aspirational brand and one associated with middle class preferences. Attending a 'Woolworths' university like UCT was associated with middle class privilege and the ability to cultivate forms of social and cultural capital valued in the labour market. Historically black or coloured institutions were seen as the equivalents of budget grocery chains like Shoprite. Reflecting on how employers read the difference between these institutions, Zinathi, a student at UWC, noted: "People go to UCT for the status, the name, and the job. They [employers] check your results and they're like UCT oh wow, or UWC red stripe!" Studies of graduate employability confirm Siya and Zinathi's belief in the perceived value of different institutions. On average, graduates of historically black institutions have higher unemployment rates than those who attended historically white institutions (Rogan and Reynolds, 2016). A study of graduates from four public universities in the Western Cape, confirmed that unemployment rates were highest among black graduates and that institutional differences were significant (CHEC 2013). This belief, in the differential value of institutions, reflects the uneven distribution of capitals in South African society and how these are structured by histories of racial segregation and contemporary developments in higher education policy.

To travel across a highly unequal city and spend time on an elite university campus transformed how many students saw themselves and their sense of place in the city. They developed aspirations and identities connected to the flows, lifestyles and markets that characterized the global city. These mobilities were facilitated by the tutoring program that provided students with a range of resources, from help with their final exams, to guidance on the application process, to financial resources to cover registration costs. As Fataar (2009) has emphasized in his work on high schools in Cape Town, students' sense of self and the possibilities for their lives are frequently constituted through the lived practices that students establish across the city's geographies. While these mobilities allowed them to access a range of resources, they did not automatically provide them with social advantage. As we shall see, the integration into campus life was challenging, as they struggled to separate their lives on campus from the conditions their families endured back in Khayelitsha. Rather than distancing them from their connections to kin, the university environment was a reminder of their obligations and of those who had remained behind in the township. Mobility provided access to critical resources, but the process of converting these into capitals—networks, cultural dispositions, and learned behaviours—was significantly more challenging.

### 2.3. Race, Mobility and 'Fitting In' on Campus

In this section, I review participants' descriptions of university after they had left the township, specifically challenges they faced adapting to campus life. As Bourdieu (1984) recognized, higher education reproduces social inequality not through the transmission of credentials

alone, but through the recognition and validation of dominant forms of social and cultural capital. While students from Khayelitsha recognized the advantages they had gained through the program, the process of converting these resources into usable capitals and dispositions which would allow them to secure social advantage was challenging.

Reflecting on the differences between his situation and the white students he interacted with in his classes and residence, Mbulelo noted:

I have a sister at home. I have to make sure she doesn't feel the pain that I'm feeling. I have to do that, and I have to build my mother a house. If I won't be able to send my sister to school or build my mom a house, then all the studying I'm doing is useless... They [white students] don't care about what's happening at home because their parents are rich, so the only thing they care about is having fun. For you, it's hard to have fun here because fun means letting go of your dream.

Mbulelo's obligations to his family were a significant source of inspiration for his studies—his goal was not merely personal independence but collective family upliftment and care. Because of this, his experience of campus life looked quite different than his peers. He couldn't fully participate in campus 'party culture' because a missed or failed exam would spell the end of his scholarship funding and would ultimately affect his ability to support his family in the future. While (Fataar, 2007, 22) suggests that educational mobilities can produce, "thin connectedness to their living spaces and firmer attachments to becoming spatially mobile," Mbulelo was motivated by a strong desire to use strengthen familial bonds through education. This meant, however, that he couldn't easily relate to his more affluent, usually white, peers.

Research on students' attitudes toward race on South African campuses reveal shifting understandings of who is seen as privileged (Swartz et al., 2018). While whiteness is still associated with privilege, students also associated privilege with social class, family background, financial security, and place of residency. As Vuyo described feeling 'out of place' on campus was both a raced and classed experience.

When you come here, it's very white for us. It doesn't accommodate for us in any way, because we come from townships and we never been in a white environment. We've always been in a black environment, and there are no blacks here or even whites who accommodate us for who we are. We have to change to be like them. We have to change in order to fit in, so I can graduate feeling like I never really fit in at UCT. I have this degree, but I never fit in here.

Reflecting on the challenges of 'fitting in,' Akona described a process of cultural and linguistic abandonment akin to Bourdieu's (1991) notion of symbolic violence, in which the culture and norms of the dominant group in a society are imposed on subordinate groups:

Most of the people who are coming from Khayelitsha, they feel pressured to speak English when they are here. Although it's nice to speak English, I feel like when we get here, we abandon our language. We abandon ourselves trying to conform to the standards of this place.

Akona continued by relaying the story of his two friends from the township who did well in high school but didn't want to come to UCT because they were worried their English wasn't good enough. They chose to attend CPUT because, as he put it, "we call it *eKasi*<sup>2</sup>, it's more like an *eKasi* vibe there. You feel at home there."

For Phumeza, adapting to life on campus involved significant changes in both the language she spoke and how she spoke:

...you get here, and it feels foreign. It feels like you're not in Cape Town anymore. And that takes your self-esteem away, and it

<sup>1</sup> South African colloquialism, similar to 'bro' or 'brother'.

<sup>2</sup> A colloquial isiXhosa term for the township that is also used to describe youth identities and cultures within the township (Swartz et al., 2012).

decreases it. Your fluency in English, when you hear other students questioning the lecturer, and you think OK, I can't do this. So that lowers your self-esteem.

Fluency in English, particularly what [Hunter \(2019\)](#) describes as a 'model-C accent' which reflects the prestige of formerly white English-medium schools, is highly prized in labour markets. Employers regard English proficiency as one of the most important competencies of graduates and this is reflected in higher income levels for those who are proficient ([Casale and Posel, 2011](#)). The pursuit of social and cultural capital requires actors to build skills, language competencies, networks and identities. For township students, this often strained their attachments with culture, family, and language. As Akona succinctly put it, conforming to the dominant culture of the university felt like they were abandoning themselves, their culture, and language.

These experiences and emotions fed directly into their support for protests against fee increases and for institutional decolonization. Rising fees increased their student debt, which affected their ability to support their families in the future, and they were expected to assimilate into a dominant campus culture that ignored their backgrounds, language, and identity ([Heleta et al., 2017](#), [Webb 2021a](#)). When asked whether they thought the tutoring program aided in the transformation of a historically white university, one student responded:

It's making an image to people, especially like you from Canada, that there are big transformations happening and that transformation is good and will improve black lives. But for me that's not true. It's not true because there are thousands of young black minds in Khayelitsha that are even brighter than I am who are capable of being here.

Students described institutional transformation as attempt at addressing an image problem. While the university was becoming increasingly diverse, the number of students from working class townships like Khayelitsha remained low. This is confirmed by research on changing enrolment patterns, which reveals that historically white institutions have become more racially diverse, but many of these students are from wealthier and middle-class backgrounds ([Cooper 2015](#)).

In [Murphy Lejeune's \(2017\)](#) work, the concept of mobility capital is used to demonstrate how elite students enhance their skills and life opportunities through the richness of travel. Living abroad provides them with opportunities to develop linguistic skills and cultural competencies which will allow them to further secure social advantage in the future. However, as [Moret \(2018\)](#) notes, for those from marginalized backgrounds, mobility itself does not necessarily translate into advantage. Rather, these acts of translation are shaped by material and symbolic hierarchies which confer advantage unequally. For township students, access to university alone was seen as insufficient in addressing legacies of poverty within their families. They recognized that they would have to adapt their dispositions, lifestyles, and speech in order to pursue social advantage. Students felt torn between the individualist cosmopolitan lifestyles they were supposed to embody on the elite campus and their attachments to family and community in the township. They saw their backgrounds, language and identity devalued as they were expected to simply 'fit in' to the dominant campus culture. This is akin to [Du Bois \(1903\)](#) notion of double consciousness, or 'twoness' experienced by African Americans as they move through and encounter themselves within the structures and institutions produced by white domination. Such a double life produces what ([Du Bois, 1903](#)) describes as a "wrenching of the soul, a peculiar sense of doubt and bewilderment."

### 3. Conclusion

Reflecting on the relationship between the township and the university, Siya emphasized "If you know you are living in a place like *Enkanini* [a highly impoverished section of Khayelitsha], you cannot just forget about your home." Siya's identity as a student was not

constructed by going away to university, but by the relationship he maintained between the university and the township. As [Holdsworth \(2009\)](#) and [Holton's \(2015\)](#) work on student mobilities in the UK has also noted, student identities are often the product of these complex articulations between home and educational spaces. As this research has demonstrated, going to university did not weaken students' connections with home. In many cases, these relationships were central to their pursuit of higher education as they hoped to use their degrees to strengthen bonds with family members and pursue intergenerational forms of social mobility. This research emphasizes the importance of these everyday student mobilities and highlights the importance of racial and spatial inequalities in the construction of student identities.

This research also reveals the transformative impact of mobility on students' identities and lives in highly unequal urban environments. It highlights the role mobilities can play in facilitating access to higher education spaces and how these are structured by histories of racial segregation, patterns of middle-class formation, and students' reading of changing urban landscapes. Changing urban economies and increasing demand for qualifications has meant that many young people see higher education as the key vector into the middle class and an escape from conditions of poverty and precarity that characterize urban townships and rural areas. While their movements are often constrained by the legacies of apartheid spatial planning, they are also inspired by flows of people, information and money that define the contemporary global city. Being mobile provides opportunities to integrate oneself into these worlds and access resources and opportunities that facilitate social mobility. They also provide opportunities for embodied transformations, as students rejected the determinacy of their pasts and came to see university as 'for them.' However, these transformations often resulted in feelings of cultural dislocation as students felt pulled between their obligations to family and lives on campus.

Geographical research on educational mobilities has frequently focused on international students and the social and cultural advantages they gain through international travel. Here [Murphy Lejeune's \(2017\)](#) 'mobility capital' is an attempt to capture how mobility confers cultural competencies, linguistic abilities, and social networks that provide distinct advantages to elite students. In the South African context, we observe a different phenomenon. While mobility is critical in accessing educational opportunities and resources, it does not automatically translate into social advantage. As [Moret \(2018\)](#) has argued, mobility simply provides access to a range of unevenly distributed resources that can, over time, enhance social mobility. For students from Khayelitsha, educational mobilities outside the township were critical in accessing university, but they struggled to convert these resources into social networks, embodied dispositions, language abilities, and cultural competencies. Rather, they experienced alienation, anger, and feelings of abandonment as they were called upon to integrate into dominant campus cultures. Their accounts reveal the critical role that race and space play in young people's identity formation, and how these structures are challenged and reproduced in educational environments.

### Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

### Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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