A Ticket to Life: Schooling and the Politics of Aspiration in Cape Town

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Abstract

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Schooling is a social project of making futures. Youth and families navigate aspirations framed by perceptions of what is possible within starkly unequal conditions of possibility. In Cape Town, persistent colonial and apartheid geography that continues to normalize racialized inequality is made visible and reproduced in large part through schooling patterns and outcomes. The convergence of post-apartheid reforms and global neoliberal trends have accelerated processes of education marketization, including a growing sector of “affordable” private schools that claim to level uneven terrain and interrupt poverty by shaping upwardly mobile youth from township communities. Critics argue they fuel an educational crisis, causing further differentiation in an already inequitable system. Proponents point to failing state schools and assert families’ right to quality education. My research foregrounds perspectives and experiences of those confronted with this double bind between “choice” and “crisis.”

Based on 21 months of ethnographic research including participant observation, 35 semi-structured interviews, six unfocused groups, and a 110-respondent educational autobiography survey, A Ticket to Life explores how students, alumni, families, and staff of a low-fee independent high school in Cape Town’s oldest township, navigate the racial and spatial politics of aspiration in an anti-Black city as well as how the school is embedded in the broader racialized politics of transnational education reform. Engaging anthropology, Black studies, and comparative education, I argue that the spatial and affective valences of aspiration are both
violent and life-saving in the context of uneven geography, that deep investments in liberal individualist notions of aspiration compromise commitments to liberatory pedagogies, and that, in the context of global racial capitalism, aspiration is deployed as a portable logic to support the transnational spread of market-based education reforms. Nevertheless, youth, families, and educators (in schools and beyond) harness education as both a site and strategy of struggle, in the process forging a capacity to conspire toward the inextricable goals of racial and spatial justice.
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACEs</td>
<td>Adverse Childhood Experiences</td>
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<tr>
<td>ANC</td>
<td>African National Congress</td>
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<td>BCM</td>
<td>Black Consciousness Movement</td>
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<tr>
<td>CAPS</td>
<td>Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement</td>
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<tr>
<td>CDC</td>
<td>Centers for Disease Control and Prevention</td>
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<tr>
<td>CDE</td>
<td>Centre For Development and Enterprise</td>
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<tr>
<td>CIE</td>
<td>Comparative and International Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>CSI</td>
<td>Corporate Social Investment</td>
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<td>CSPP</td>
<td>Collaboration Schools Pilot Project</td>
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<tr>
<td>DA</td>
<td>Democratic Alliance</td>
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<tr>
<td>DBE</td>
<td>Department of Basic Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DBT</td>
<td>Dialectical Behavioral Therapy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DSM</td>
<td>Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EE</td>
<td>Equal Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>FET</td>
<td>Further Education and Training</td>
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<tr>
<td>GET</td>
<td>General Education and Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IDAF</td>
<td>International Defence and Aid Fund</td>
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<tr>
<td>ISASA</td>
<td>Independent Schools Association of Southern Africa</td>
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<tr>
<td>LO</td>
<td>Life Orientation</td>
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<tr>
<td>MEC</td>
<td>Member of the Executive Council</td>
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<td>NAISA</td>
<td>National Alliance of Independent Schools Association</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acronym</td>
<td>Full Form</td>
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<tr>
<td>NSFAS</td>
<td>National Student Financial Aid Scheme</td>
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<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>PAC</td>
<td>Pan Africanist Congress</td>
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<tr>
<td>PPP</td>
<td>Public-Private Partnership</td>
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<tr>
<td>PTSD</td>
<td>Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder</td>
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<tr>
<td>RTC</td>
<td>Reclaim the City</td>
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<tr>
<td>SABC</td>
<td>South African Broadcasting Corporation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SADTU</td>
<td>South African Democratic Teachers Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>SASA</td>
<td>South African Schools Act</td>
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<tr>
<td>SGB</td>
<td>School Governing Body</td>
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<tr>
<td>SOP</td>
<td>School Operating Partner</td>
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<tr>
<td>STEM</td>
<td>Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TFA</td>
<td>Teach for America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRC</td>
<td>Truth and Reconciliation Commission</td>
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<tr>
<td>TVET</td>
<td>Technical and Vocational Education and Training</td>
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<td>UCT</td>
<td>University of Cape Town</td>
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<tr>
<td>UWC</td>
<td>University of the Western Cape</td>
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<tr>
<td>WCED</td>
<td>Western Cape Education Department</td>
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<tr>
<td>YCM</td>
<td>Youth Consciousness Movement</td>
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Dedication

For my family and ancestors, who taught me that we “work, study, and listen, so we may learn; learn, so we may teach.” And for Steven Gregory, George Clement Bond, and “Ms. Ntsika”—three teachers that transitioned during this journey.
Introduction: “A Ticket to Life”

aspire (v.) “strive for, seek eagerly to attain, long to reach”

from Latin ad “to, toward” (in space or time) + spirare “to breathe”

I first traveled to South Africa for a 2014 teacher residency, three years after a principal from Launch, a low-fee private school network serving youth from township\(^1\) communities, observed me teaching an Advanced Placement World History lesson in a Newark, NJ charter school in the United States. During my initial three-month trip to Launch’s Cape Town campus, school days regularly began with student-led community meetings. One stands out. Mpumelelo, an outspoken grade 12 student, took the floor to deliver big news through the medium of a fable. The story followed the life of a bird, living in a chicken coop. Day in and day out, the bird wandered the enclosure aimlessly, pecking for food like the rest, until one day, an eagle flew by. The eagle asked him in confusion, “Why are you walking around with chickens? Don’t you know you have wings like me? You are supposed to fly.” Having lived in a coop his whole life, this eagle had not discovered his wings. He took his place soaring in the sky. Mpumelelo culminated by announcing his admission to a top university and expressing gratitude for the Launch education that awakened him to his wings. The school community erupted in applause.

We did not know then that 2015, the following year when Mpumelelo started university, would be widely considered the end of the rainbow politics that characterized South Africa’s

\(^1\) Townships are periurban areas that were officially designated for Black inhabitation by colonial and apartheid laws. In many instances, these areas were populated as a result of forced removals after the apartheid-era Group Areas Act of 1950 established distinct areas in which people were permitted to live according to racial classification. However, Langa township, the site of the school, was established in 1927 and dates back to the Cape Colony and Union governments’ racist establishment of “native locations.” Townships largely remain segregated, economically marginalized communities with disparities in service delivery, density, and access to employment and schooling.
postapartheid transition (Collis-Buthelezi 2017; Modisane, Collis-Buthelezi, and Ouma 2017), that his campus and others would be ground zero for this turning point, or that a fellow Launch alumnus would photograph the globally resonant moment for the *New York Times*. In his classmate’s photo, scores of students line the steps of the University of Cape Town’s Jameson Hall, now renamed Sarah Baartman Hall, against the famous vista of Table Mountain in the background. The photo’s wide angle lens helps viewers understand just how massive the young crowd is, but the students are all fixated on something in the foreground beyond the frame and our viewpoint. Something monumental, judging from the numerous people recording it on their phones. The caption reveals they are witnessing the hard-won fall of a statue of British imperialist Cecil John Rhodes.

In 2018, during my fourth and longest stay in South Africa for a full Launch school year, I reconnected with Mpumelelo, now a university graduate and postgraduate student. As we made plans via Facebook to meet, his most recent post signaled his perspective had evolved since that fairytale of flying the coop on the wings of elevated aspirations four years prior. The post cited a familiar line from the antiapartheid declarations of the liberation movement’s 1955 Freedom Charter: “*The doors of learning and culture shall be opened!*” But the next line quipped, “*The doors:*” followed by a GIF of a cartoon wolf in jail stripes strenuously prying doors open only to find a new door behind each door in an endless loop. When we met up at a public library in town, he told me that looking back, he and his high school peers had viewed Launch as “*a golden key*” for doors closed to their elders and “*a ticket to a better life*” beyond the township. For most, the school had delivered in terms of high exam scores and university access. Yet, attending university with a so-called “born free” generation that was scrutinizing the negotiated
terms of South Africa’s celebrated transition from apartheid to liberal democracy with capitalism intact, participating in student activism against its maintenance of racial, class, and gender inequity in a postapartheid South Africa, and returning to Launch frequently through alumni engagement had complicated his view of schooling and its roles in eradicating and/or perpetuating inequality. Previously, he believed that, by inculcating middle class aspiration in Black youth contending with poverty in townships and rural areas, the growing sector of “affordable” private schools (Languille 2016) like his alma mater would advance justice, opening doors still typically closed to his peers. This access, despite being limited to those with a “ticket,” would enable social mobility for some which would bring about broader transformation for all, albeit in trickle-down form. Now, Mpumelelo was starting to complicate this theory. “People can make out of education anything they want. But the system of schools that’s been put in place I believe is a mechanism to manufacture labor and capital and not necessarily to have the kind of impact it’s sugarcoated to have in society.”

To elaborate this stance, Mpumelelo told another story. This time not about chicken to eagle metamorphosis, but about hypothetical students he named Sizwe and Becky whose divergent paths from a dusty township on the Cape Flats versus an affluent, leafy southern suburb are shaped by what he called “the triple helix of poverty, unemployment, and inequality... the interconnectedness of the issues South Africa faces as a country holistically.” Students like Sizwe did everything right to make it from township and rural contexts to the nation’s most prestigious university, yet opted to sleep in libraries without food during breaks because they lacked money to travel home to rural areas or did not want to make the psychic journey back to informal housing on the urban periphery. “How much of access is it to use that space adequately...
enough to fulfill your dreams and hopes if you go there and you’re hungry and you have a host of other things to deal with?” He explained that aspiration and access alone will never level these students’ realities “until certain issues are dealt with properly.”

This dissertation explores schooling and aspiration in the context of these persistent “issues” through the lenses of students, alumni, teachers, and parents from a single low-fee independent school serving youth from Langa, Cape Town’s oldest township. The initial story told in that 2014 school community meeting stuck with me and raised lingering questions that brought me back to South Africa three times over the following four years. As we celebrated his news, it struck me that the central lesson of Mpumelelo’s fable was much like his school’s theory of change: the transformation that enabled that chicken-turned-eagle to soar was an interior one, a mindset shift, sparked simply by another bird having higher expectations for him, in turn raising his own aspirations. But what of the coop, the constraining material conditions? Presumably, they persist, continuing to constrain other birds, even after that one learned to aspire to an elevated life station and took flight. In this dissertation, I explore the important work Launch schools do to help Black youth living in constraining township conditions “take flight,” but I simultaneously explore their critical perspectives on the limits of this model and its potentially reproductive effects in the context of the “triple helix” of issues inherited from colonial and apartheid racial capitalism that persist in its neoliberal dispensation. Through this exploration, I probe the politics of notions of “aspiration” that are increasingly deployed to reinforce scripts of individual striving as panacea to structural inequality and to legitimate market-based education interventions that reconstitute racial capitalism in “post”-racial South Africa and beyond.
From 2015 to 2017, South African education held a global spotlight due to the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall protests that highlighted how prohibitive fees, outsourcing, and the persisting coloniality of historically White universities affect Black students and workers. The movement’s 2016 peak coincided with the fortieth anniversary of the 1976 youth uprisings against Bantu Education that had signaled a death knell for apartheid rule, highlighting education’s continuing role as grounds for staging broader political struggles in a postapartheid South Africa. Yet the entrenchment of market forces in education that sparked these university uprisings remains equally, if not more, salient at the basic education level. In the wake of the protests and their important gains, questions linger about why R-12\(^2\) schooling has not sounded a similar alarm. Linda Chisholm, Professor of Education at the University of Johannesburg, has argued that, “if fees should fall anywhere, it should be in schools first” (2016). South Africa’s deeply unequal schooling landscape includes high-fee public schools, low-fee private schools, elite independent schools, no-fee government schools, and, due to 2018 legislation that indicates marketization\(^3\) is only accelerating, donor-funded government schools and charter-modeled “collaboration schools” (Hunter 2018). This complex terrain reflects inheritances of colonial and apartheid history, as well as concessions made in a negotiated settlement to democratic rule that have invited marketization of an already racially differentiated system, compromised equity, and negated redistributive state expenditures (Black 2021; Christie 1995; Hunter 2019; Tikly and Mabogoane 1997). Apartheid-era education policy notoriously leveraged schools to constrict the

\(^2\) Grade R is the first year of school in South Africa, which stands for “reception year.”

\(^3\) I used “market-based” and “marketization” to refer to the growing role of market forces in state education provision, including increased “choice,” competition, and movement to access schools, public schools charging fees, public-private partnerships, and the subsidizing of low-fee private schools. I use this term instead of “privatization” to emphasize that market-based reform is not simply about the private sector, but about how the private sector interacts with the state (Hunter 2019; Tikly and Mabogoane 1997).
aspirations of Black people and create a laboring class through differentiated curricula, facilities, and expenditure (Kallaway 2002; Nkomo 1990). In a postapartheid South Africa where “the doors of learning” have opened to a marketplace, the capacity to aspire remains unequal, rendering “aspiration” as a market pitch for schools that sell expanded possible futures. In this pay-to-play system, the school as a “ticket to life” is no mere metaphor.

Drawing on 21 months of ethnographic research conducted from 2014–2019, A Ticket to Life asks: how do students, alumni, families, and staff of a low-fee private school navigate the politics of aspiration in an anti-Black city and marketized schooling landscape? I argue that the spatial and affective valences of aspiration are both violent and life-saving in the context of enduring apartheid geography, that deep investments in liberal individualist notions of aspiration compromise commitments to liberatory pedagogies, and that, in the context of global racial capitalism, traveling deficit-based education reforms deploy aspiration as a portable market logic. Nevertheless, youth, families, and educators (in schools and beyond) harness education as both a site and a strategy of struggle, in the process forging a capacity to conspire toward the inextricable goals of racial and spatial justice.

The remainder of this introduction offers an overview of my research and the resulting dissertation. I first briefly situate the study within broader scholarly discussions of the politics of aspiration in education. Then I elaborate on the research questions and describe in detail the fieldwork site, the ethnographic methods employed in the research, and my positionality in the research context. Next, I outline the structure of the dissertation and provide an overview of each chapter’s main arguments. Finally, I respond to perhaps the most pressing question for anyone taking the time to read this text: so what?
1.1 Aspiration as Research Problem

My research aims to intervene in a broader discussion on politics and pedagogies of aspiration that has proliferated amidst the increasing anxieties and precarities of market economies that intensify education as the morally legitimized avenue for reproducing privilege or generating social mobility (Mathew and Lukose 2020; Stambach and Hall 2017). This discussion has unfolded along multiple lines of inquiry. Drawing on work that places futurity, rather than pastness, at the center of anthropology’s preoccupation with “culture,” some scholars have described aspiration as a “capacity” to navigate social space toward desired futures and focused their critical attention on problematizing its unequal distribution, coerced differentiation, and hierarchical valorization in the context of inequality (Appadurai 2013; Bryant and Knight 2019; Gilbertson 2017; Roder 2017). Another strand of scholarship has problematized aspiration itself, conceptualizing it as a hegemonic notion of hope that functions as handmaid to neoliberal governance by forging “aspiration nations” of hard-working, burdened young people with individualist imaginings of the future and obscured consciousness of the structural sources of inequality and the state’s role in addressing it (Brown 2013; Pimlott-Wilson 2017).

Scholars have also illuminated the multivalent functionings of aspiration in educational and youth contexts. Focusing on the temporality of aspiration, they illustrate how students and families approach schooling as a project of future-making, where their attempts to stretch the horizon of the possible are shaped by past and present unequal conditions of possibility (Hall 2017; Mathew 2018). They also look beyond classrooms to understand how youth activists leverage educational institutions, beyond credentials, as staging grounds for aspirational politics of democratic participation (Strong 2017), or how youth outside of schools wrest creative agency
in their negotiations of (un)imagined futures in contexts where deficient education and extreme unemployment threaten to hold them in perpetual states of “waithood” (Honwana 2012). Exploring the spatiality of aspiration, important work examines how the everyday environments of youth can variously produce possibility, constriction, or foreclosure of futures, as well as how the school in particular functions as a venue that shapes how youth find their places within uneven geographies (Katz 2018; 2019). Finally, a growing strand of inquiry probes the affective dimensions of aspiration that portray the self and its interiority as the core source of social mobility for youth without access to privileged resource mobilizations. Important work on the context of liberalizing India highlights “pedagogies of aspiration” that train youth in the affective and aesthetic labor of self-fashioning through emotion management and self-presentation as means of managing “the possibilities and anxieties of uncertain futures” (Mathew and Lukose 2020, 693). Such work examines how aspiration is formally taught through lessons in empowerment and enterprise that mobilize young people to avert attention from the probable and direct their internal resources toward dreams of the (im)possible (Desai 2020), while calling for more ethnographic accounts of the “everyday experiences and stakes of fashioning aspirational selves in educational contexts” (Mathew and Lukose 2020, 693). This work has been instructive for my study, particularly in its attention to the relationships between aspiration and hierarchies of difference along lines of caste and gender. I aim to respond to this invitation to expand the conversation in important directions.

Recent work in anthropology and education on the politics of aspiration tends to center the global neoliberal turn as the key rupture producing the widening inequities that notions of aspiration are increasingly called on to manage, and foregrounds analyses of aspiration’s class
dimensions (Hall 2017). This tendency presents a few analytical problems. First, this periodization obscures a long range view of colonial projects and the racist functionings of world capitalism that stretch well before the 1970s retreat from postwar welfare statecraft and into our “present futures” (Gerrard, Sriprakash, and Rudolph 2021, 5). Second, while educational scholars working from a frame of neoliberalism typically engage class thoroughly, they often fail to acknowledge the constituent “racial underpinnings of their key category of analysis: capitalism” (Gerrard, Sriprakash, and Rudolph 2021, 5). Finally, this frame divorces the important emergence of scholarship on the problematic of aspiration from pressing contemporary questions on the persistence of racism across purportedly postracial contexts worldwide.

In this dissertation, I engage an explicitly anti-racist lens that thoroughly engages the racial dimensions of the politics of aspiration in order to counteract the short shrift on structural analyses of racism in global perspective that has plagued both the broader discipline of anthropology (Mullings 2005) and the field of comparative and international education (Walker, Sriprakash, and Tikly 2021). Working at the intersections of these fields, I draw on anti-racist anthropological, educational, and Black Studies scholarship that understands racism as a pressing global, yet historically-situated and shifting, phenomenon (Abu El-Haj 2015; Clarke and Thomas 2006; Gordon 2007; Gregory and Sanjek 1994; Gerrard, Sriprakash, and Rudolph 2021; Motala and Vally 2010). In particular, I draw on theories of racial capitalism to frame my inquiry into the politics of aspiration in education. Across contexts, education has been constituted through and works to sustain the coarticulation of capitalism and racism. At the same time education has revealed the limits of racist control and been leveraged in contestation. The necessity of this lens is especially clear in the case of South Africa, where the racist geography of domination
constructed by the apartheid state was bolstered by a “pedagogy of domination” (Nkomo 1990) that explicitly regulated Black aspiration in ways that continue to shape education and society—but a legacy of resistance in and through education is resurgent (Vally 2019). The notion of racial capitalism itself was originally generated by the South African context. While scholars and activists like Neville Alexander (No Sizwe⁴ 1979) and Bernard Magubane (1979) forged this concept in their attempts to apprehend the particular political economy of South African white supremacy and reject liberal claims that an evolved capitalism would erode the racial structure of apartheid, Cedric Robinson’s work challenged the perceived exceptionalism of the South African case by theorizing capitalism’s constituent racialism across time and space (Al-Bulushi 2020).

Drawing on both legacies, I argue that theorizing racial capitalism from post-rainbow South Africa, particularly through the lens of the politics of aspiration in a marketized education landscape, remains fruitful for understanding the broader global functioning of the contemporary neoliberal variant of racial capitalism, including in the US.

This dissertation on schooling in Cape Town is also informed by the growing body of scholars writing from and on contemporary South Africa about the politics of aspiration. Recent educational scholarship examines aspiration in relation to reproduction of privilege, particularly querying how admissions processes maintain White dominance at elite primary schools in an overwhelmingly Black country (Jansen and Kriger 2020). Accounts of young peoples’ navigation of educational aspirations across rural and urban terrains still shaped by apartheid geography reveal how self-formation is entangled with mobility, particularly in Cape Town (Fataar 2010). Important research explores how young women navigate romantic relationships amidst the

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⁴ Alexander published *One Azania, One Nation* (1979) under the pen name No Sizwe.
anxieties of aspiring to consumerist lifestyles in the “aspirational city” of Johannesburg, indexed through indigenous language monikers Gauteng, Egoli, and Maboneng (Masango 2020). Finally, drawing on scholarship that explores debt and aspiration in financial inclusion projects (James 2014), recent work has centered #FeesMustFall activists’ experiences of aspiration and educational debt, complicating scholarly fixations on individualist notions of aspiration by illustrating that, even in the context of neoliberalism, young South Africans’ aspirations frequently focus on collective social mobility and family well-being (Webb 2018).

1.2 Conducting an Unbounded School Ethnography

The central question of this research was: how do students, alumni, families, and staff of a low-fee private school navigate the politics of aspiration in an anti-Black city and marketized schooling landscape? To answer it, I defined aspiration as a capacity to navigate social space toward desired futures (Appadurai 2013). I engaged the multiple and overlapping dimensions of this concept—temporal, spatial, affective; individual and collective; violent and life-saving—as well as the ways racial capitalism shapes the social space that study participants navigate. I operationalized the central research question with the following sub-questions:

1. How do students, teachers, alumni, and parents perceive Launch’s role in facilitating social mobility and social transformation? and
2. What tensions do they perceive between these two aims?

In order to answer the research questions, I conducted research from December 2017 to January 2019 to span a full South African school year (January to December 2018). Additionally,

\[\text{Place of gold. Place of lights. Masango argues that these names point beyond histories of gold rush and early electrification to ongoing imaginings of the city as a place where people can realize aspirations to riches and luxury.}\]
eight months of pilot research from 2014–2016 while participating in a teacher exchange informed the study design. My primary research site was Launch, a low-fee independent high school serving Grades 8–12 in Langa, a township on the periphery of Cape Town. Since its 2004 founding, the school has grown into a network of six institutions serving five township communities and one rural community across three provinces. I visited all six to get a sense of the range of contexts, but focused on the first and oldest school, which had 245 students in 2018.

The Cape Town school was the most fitting site for this research for several reasons. First, it has occupied three locations across distinctly racialized areas of a postapartheid city, offering students, educators, families, and alumni valuable perspectives on understandings of the politics of aspiration in relation to spatial politics. Second, the enduring divided geography of apartheid is entrenched in Cape Town and continues to normalize stark racial and class borders that are made visible through unequal schooling patterns and outcomes in the city. Furthermore, the Western Cape Province, in which Cape Town is located, is the only province governed by the Democratic Alliance (DA), the African National Congress’s (ANC) main opposition party, which allowed me to observe how the governance of both the ANC (at the national level) and DA (provincial) shape education policy, particularly in relation to marketization. Additionally, Langa is a socially significant site as the oldest township in Cape Town, the site of much apartheid resistance, and a continuing site of frequent protests for service improvements. According to the most recent census data collected in 2011, Langa had 52,401 residents, 57.5% of whom lived in formal dwellings. Black African was the self-designation of 99.1% of people and isiXhosa was
the home language for 92%. Of adults over age 20, 33% had passed the matric exam,6 while 7% had higher education of any type (Stats SA 2011). By contrast, Launch’s website reports a pass rate consistently over 95%, with 75% of the school’s graduates pursuing higher education. While the student population of Launch’s oldest school mirrored the demographics of Langa during my research,7 the teaching staff was notably diverse for the Cape Town context, where the focus on desegregating student populations of formerly white schools has not been coupled with diversifying staff, and township schools also reflect the persisting segregation of their neighborhoods. By contrast, Launch’s staff included isiXhosa-speaking teachers from Langa and the Eastern Cape province; Capetonian teachers who variously identified as Coloured, Muslim, or Indian, sometimes overlappingly; African teachers from beyond South Africa, particularly Zimbabwe and the Democratic Republic of Congo; and teachers who identified themselves as White of either English or Afrikaans descent. Additionally, there were four staff members throughout my years at Launch that identified themselves as American and either White or Black. Notably, two of these staff had previously worked in a major charter school network, signaling Launch’s embeddedness in transnational scales of education reform.

Launch and its earliest teachers have a history in Langa predating the 2004 founding of the school. In 1990, as apartheid began to dwindle, Launch’s founder Joseph, a White educator at Forest High School in an adjacent White-classified neighborhood, worked with colleagues as

6 The National Senior Certificate exam, also known as the matriculation or “matric” exam, functions as both a high school completion requirement and a qualifier for tertiary study. Different pass levels gain one access to different higher education pathways, with the highest passes granting access to public universities. “Matric” is also colloquially used to refer to a Grade 12 student or the Grade 12 year itself.

7 The students of all of Launch’s schools mirror the communities in which they are located, but, reflecting South Africa’s diversity, this makes for a lot of variation between sites in terms of student populations and which and how many home languages are offered at the schools.
well as teachers in Langa’s high schools to bring Langa youth to his school for Maths, Science, and English tutoring. They also arranged social exchanges and sports matches between the students of the two schools. Gradually, Forest teachers shifted to working with youth and then teachers at high school sites in Langa and eventually Joseph founded Launch as a selective no-fee private school to “provide student-centred, maths and science-focused education to promising students from grades 9 to 12 [eventually 8-12].” Launch has an extended 9 hour school day from 7:45am to 4:30pm, Saturday classes and activities from 9-12, and programs during public and school holidays. In order to be eligible, students must live or go to school in one of the economically marginalized communities served by a particular Launch school. There are several admission requirements, repeatedly emphasized to me as “diagnostic.” They include:

- an English reading age test
- a maths assessment
- a three-day selection camp where students participate in leadership activities, discussions of the code of conduct, and team-building exercises (also called “recruitment” camp)
- a family interview at each student’s home, during which students and their parents/guardians commit to the code of conduct and sign the school contract
- a family and student orientation meeting on the day before the school year starts.

The school’s mission statement articulates a vision of “positive transformation of communities through the meaningful education of children in those communities” and states, “Our attention will focus on enabling the self-awareness necessary for each student’s growth to healthy
adulthood, and to ensuring optimal academic results which will qualify every student for successful tertiary education and a fulfilling future."

Launch was variously classified as both a “low-fee private school” and a “semi-private school” during the time I conducted research because it falls below the fee threshold to receive a state per-pupil subsidy. It was started in 2004 with seed funds from a social change investor founded by a South African tech entrepreneur. Thereafter, Launch received funds from three major sources: foundations in South Africa, the United States, and the United Kingdom; corporate social investment (CSI) funds from South African businesses and banks; and a state subsidy from the Western Cape Education Department. From 2004–2016, it was a “no-fee” independent school. Families paid no tuition or fees except for uniform and transport. Facing budget issues after some of its larger funders shifted investment to a new charter school–like model in the Western Cape, Launch transitioned in 2017 to charging a “low fee” of R400 per month from January to November (R4,400/year). For context, the most expensive public schools cost up to R60,000/year and elite private day schools can cost over R200,000/year. In this context, publicly traded for-profit school chain Curro, with costs ranging from R1,900 to R8,650 per month in 2018, brand themselves as “affordable” despite being inaccessible to most. As a nonprofit, Launch charges significantly less than for-profit schools. Still, “low-fee” is relative (Languille 2016). Stats SA’s 2014/2015 Living Conditions Survey revealed that half the population lived below the 2015 upper bound poverty line of R992 per person per month (Stats SA 2019). As of 2016, over 65% of South African students attend no-fee government schools legally prohibited from charging fees due to the income levels of the communities they serve (Villette 2016). In 2017, 45% of Western Cape schools charged fees, (Motala and Carel 2019),
but all of Launch’s feeder primary schools and the four government high schools in Langa are no-fee. Average fees at township government schools that do charge fees are R200/year (Hunter 2019, 145). During my research, I learned from teachers, parents, and students that, from the time Launch instituted a fee until I left, they did not actually collect it from a significant portion of families, especially of Grade 11 and 12 students who had started when it was still no-fee. School leaders emphasized never turning away families who could not pay. Yet, some staff, especially alumni who had attended when it was no-fee, expressed concern that, while Launch still only admits students who reside in the township, it could shift the character of the student body to more middle class rather than those “most in need.”

I conducted research in South Africa from 2014–2019. My initial three-month stay from June to August 2014 was spent as a Faculty-in-Residence at Launch’s original Cape Town school and a Fellow at the Educator Collective, a teacher development organization founded by former Launch teachers in 2007. One of the Educator Collective’s core initiatives is to recruit 10% of each graduating Launch class to become teachers through a program called Tomorrow’s Leaders. The program funds a student’s completion of a Bachelors of Education through distance learning at one of South Africa’s public universities while they serve as an intern teacher at Launch. The program has recently expanded to work with graduates from other schools and place pre-service teachers in government schools located in the communities Launch serves. As a fellow, I participated in a mentorship exchange with Lukhanyo, a Launch alumnus who was studying to be a History and Life Orientation teacher. My 2014 experience culminated in designing and delivering professional development sessions at the Aspiring Educators Conference, a convening of pre-service, in-service, and veteran South African teachers from Launch and a variety of
independent and government schools that have formed a Collective of Excellent Schools with a shared mission of encouraging Black youth, particularly from low-income township and rural settings, to see teaching as both an aspirational profession and potentially activist work.

I returned to South Africa for three months each in 2015 and 2016 to participate in these convenings and to conduct pilot research for a longer study. Through this work and the relationships I established with teachers, school leaders, students, and teacher development professionals, I traveled to schools in five of South Africa’s nine provinces across the spectrum of elite fee-paying private and public schools, no-fee public schools, and low-fee private schools. These relationships enabled me to return for a 13-month stretch of ethnographic fieldwork from December 2017 to January 2019. This time frame was chosen so I could follow a full school year at Launch. It also allowed me to witness two cohorts process matric exam results, a major milestone within South African schooling. The research design was informed by the preliminary work with Launch in my capacity as a teacher and teacher educator, which had sparked my interest in the school’s overall model and theory of change, as well as the growing influence of market-based approaches in South African education, including low-fee private schools and market intervention in no-fee government schools through public-private partnerships.

I engaged in participant observation and observant participation (Shange 2019; Tedlock 1991) in the school, the Langa neighborhood, the Cape Town metropolitan area, and various sites throughout the country. I wrote field notes three to five days a week, administered a student survey with 110 respondents (a handful of these were alumni who piloted the instrument for me), conducted thirty-five semi-structured interviews, facilitated six (un)focus groups, and collected and analyzed documents relevant to the research questions. Fieldwork entailed placing myself in
various contexts to observe and participate in both formal activities and casual interaction and writing jottings about everyday life and social practices. These contexts included classrooms, assemblies, informal gathering spaces, events, trips, faculty meetings, spaces in the surrounding neighborhood, and educational and activist spaces in the larger city. I began with observations that were more general in scope, keeping my eyes and ears attuned to behavior and interaction, content of conversations, repetition vs. irregularity, uses of space, social markers (e.g. accents, clothing type) and social protocols/scripts (LeCompte and Schensul 2010). I later developed more focus, choosing specific times, locations, behaviors, and topics to watch/listen for with the goal of “establishing and refining the characteristics and relations” among elements and exploring particular themes or answering specific questions that arose (Adler and Adler 1994, 381). For example, one practice that emerged as important was commuting by taxi, bus, and foot with students and teachers both within Langa and between the township and other areas of Cape Town as they traversed the borders of a divided city.

Early in my fieldwork, I visited all six Launch sites across South Africa to get a sense of the range of contexts in which the school operates. As part of this process, I administered an educational autobiography survey to Grade 12 students at each school and then held a session explaining the research and inviting them to offer feedback or suggestions on the research design. The survey gathered baseline data, such as previous school attended and education level of guardians, as well as open-ended information like postsecondary goals. At the flagship school in Cape Town where I centered my research, participant observation/observant participation focused on a Grade 12 cohort (26 students) for several reasons. First, I had witnessed some of their development since originally meeting them as Grade 8s when I shadowed their teacher on
my 2014 trip, and could build on these prior interactions. Second, they could offer perspectives on the lived experience of the matric exam process and its stakes. Finally, they were one of the last two cohorts that had attended Launch both at its old location in the formerly White area of Pinelands and at its new location in Langa township, which equipped them with valuable perspectives. In addition to observing Life Orientation, History, and Maths classes, accompanying them on activities like debate matches, and attending their matric ball (similar to prom), I facilitated several sessions over the year during their mentor period (similar to homeroom) where we had in-depth discussions on the question: what is the title of your story and what is it about? We discussed what they would include in an autobiography focused on their educational journeys both in and beyond schooling. Through these sessions, students explored their educational pasts and presents and their projections and hopes for the future. They also interviewed an older member of their household about their educational autobiography.

After getting to know the staff and Grade 12 cohort more deeply, I began to conduct in-depth, semi-structured, recorded interviews. They typically lasted one to two hours, but a couple lasted four to six hours and stretched over two to four sessions. Interviews explored themes related to the research questions and those that emerged from research. These included student and family aspirations and the perceived role of schooling in fulfilling them; overlaps and tensions between participant visions of individual/family mobility and broader, redistributive understandings of social transformation; and the moments and spaces in which locally significant markers of difference (race, class, language, gender, location) become salient. I drew from ethnographic interviewing and life history strategies (Angrosino 2007; Mintz 1979; Spradley 1979), varied between open-ended questions and probes, and made sure to couple general,
present-tense questions with “episodic” questions about specific events that required participants to give more detailed accounts (Maxwell 2013). I selected ten students and ten staff and administrators for interviews via purposive sampling to ensure representation of a diversity of traits that emerged as important, such as neighborhood and housing context, academic performance, migration status, racial and ethnic identification, gender, and language. Through convenience sampling from previous contacts and then snowball sampling, I interviewed ten alumni (five of whom were current or former staff at one of Launch’s schools or at the Educator Collective). I also conducted interviews with three Launch parents through convenience sampling, the director of the Educator Collective, and a joint interview with two regular attendees of the Aspiring Educators Conference who matriculated from and were preparing to teach in no-fee government schools. I loosely followed a protocol, but interviews were semi-structured to allow for exploration of topics that arose in conversation. Beyond these 35 formal, recorded interviews, I had countless unstructured casual conversations with participants, quite often in transit. My jottings from these interactions informed the larger project.

In addition to interviews, I convened six recorded (un)focus groups of eight to ten participants each, two different groups of students from the flagship Cape Town Launch school, three with students from other Launch schools, and one with members of Launch’s offsite central management team that managed operations, fundraising, marketing, accounts, and human resources. The founder/director joined us for this final group, as did a staff member who coordinates admissions, and an alum who manages events. Each group was about 80 minutes long. Influenced heavily by Launch’s practice of Life Orientation Circles, regular groups where students and staff engage in open ended discussions processing personal and community issues, I
scrapped the focus group protocols I had planned and attempted to approach these convenings as “unfocus” groups. The first forty minutes were semi-structured through a single activity/question where I placed ten sticky notes each with one- to two-word themes or frequently used terms that had arisen from research thus far in the center of the table or board, and asked people to kick off the discussion by reacting to them in any way they were moved to, including anything they felt was not there (I explained how these terms were generated at the end of the convening). Then, after a short break, we reconvened as an “unfocus group” without prompts. As Nancy Franz (2011) has argued, some of the best insights and most interesting topics come from “the unfocused focus group” engaged in “substantive discussion on topics not directly tied to the goals of the project” (1380). “Unfocused conversations in focus groups can reveal important insights into the topic, the group’s culture, the busy and messy context of life, and the value of the group experience for participants” (Franz 2011, 1380). These were at times challenging to curate, given that they required restraint from facilitating, but I found that relinquishing control of the conversational path yielded benefits by allowing deeper follow-up on topics of particular interest to participants and moving the conversation in entirely unexpected, but important directions. For example, one of these unfocus groups generated a charged discussion on race that I write about in Interlude 3, which I don’t think would have surfaced through prompting or steering. Although interviews and unfocus groups were conducted primarily in English, the language of instruction in the school, I took beginner conversational isiXhosa classes at the University of Cape Town during my research and invited participants to use their full language repertoires in interviews and unfocus groups to express nuanced concepts and shades of meaning or whenever they deemed necessary. A Launch alumnus and social sciences postgraduate student
also participated in the student unfocus groups to take notes and provide support in translating
the occasional isiXhosa student responses, as well as in one of the parent interviews in which I
asked questions in English and responses were given in a hybrid of English and isiXhosa.

Beyond Launch, I engaged with a variety of schools and educational organizations and
attended provincial and national government hearings, conferences at universities and in popular
education spaces, and activist organizing meetings and public actions through invitations from
professional and personal contacts. For example, a Launch alumna who now works in teacher
development took me to all the feeder primary schools in Langa from which Launch students are
recruited. A staff member who had graduated from a government high school in Langa took me
to tour the school and meet the principal. A Johannesburg teacher who attended one of my
sessions at the Aspiring Educators Conference invited me to observe lessons at his no-fee
government school in Soweto, and a youth organizer I met at the same conference invited me to
do a workshop with teachers at a government school in the Cape Flats. A researcher for an
education activism organization that I met at a public hearing invited me to a forum where
leaders from South Africa’s two largest teachers’ unions discussed the role of unions in
promoting quality education. Housing and land rights activists in my core friend group in Cape
Town frequently brought me along to events and actions in their work that they felt related to my
research in education. One friend invited me to a popular education conference where her
organization presented their pedagogical approach to spatial justice campaigns in Cape Town
through weekly anti-eviction legal trainings in affected communities. I accompanied another
friend to Xolobeni, an area in the rural Eastern Cape on South Africa’s “Wild Coast,” where she
was providing legal advocacy for a community’s sustained activism against encroachment by
foreign mining conglomerates. A roommate invited me to a national congress that convened hundreds of high school activists organizing for equal education and the redress of school infrastructure disparity across the country. I also gained insight into the involvement of multinational actors in market-based reform initiatives in South Africa’s basic education sector through contacts from previous work in a US charter school organization. For example, a former colleague invited me to observe a workshop hosted by a teacher education startup with ties to US and UK foundations and organizations. Finally, in the spirit of “deep hanging out” (Rosaldo 1994) I attended family and community events like weddings and holiday parties with contacts from school and beyond. I learned to see invitations as gifts. They invariably proved educative and were indispensable to my understanding of the broader research context.

Relying on several research methods in tandem allowed for triangulation, checking whether data generated from all methods supported similar conclusions, and complementarity, gaining an understanding of multiple aspects of phenomena (Maxwell 2013). For example, interviewing participants after observing them in another setting allowed me to ask episodic questions that probed them to reflect on particular moments. I also conducted content and thematic analysis on school documents like manuals, admission contracts, and annual reports, as well as policy documents pertaining to provincial and national education governance, and news media reporting on contentious education policy changes in the Western Cape. While in the field, I reviewed and reflected on the corpus of data regularly, both according to descriptive codes in the questions and framework, and in terms of emic codes that emerged from the research. I took note of patterns and questions in analytic memos. After returning from the field I manually reviewed all notes, memos, photos, and documents and listened to and took notes on interview
and focus group recordings. I then transcribed, coded transcripts and notes, and subjected data to thematic and textual analysis to revise my set of codes and generate larger categories and themes.

Schools, when conceptualized as what occurs within the walls of a building, can be constrained and constraining sites. “School ethnographies” have sometimes been criticized for myopic portrayals of schools as realities unto themselves, disconnected from the layers of larger daily struggles in which they are lodged (McDermott and Raley 2011). For this reason, my overall research design supported a multiscalar methodological approach attuned to Launch’s embeddedness in complex and interconnected schooling and political landscapes at city, provincial, national, and transnational scales. While the resulting dissertation is an in-depth ethnography of a single low-fee private school in Cape Town, it approaches “the school” not as a bounded entity but as an intersection in social space where a variety of processes that extend beyond its walls, both in space and time, collide—an unbounded space where we might glimpse the entire society, and perhaps the globe, at play. Understanding that “[i]t takes careful attention to detail by a person already much in the know about schools to discern connections with the wider social order,” I drew on my experience as a teacher to remain attuned to “explicit ties among the arts and artifices of teaching/learning situations and writ large cultural politics” (McDermott and Raley 2011, 36–37). While my background as a teacher was an asset, ethnographic research is also fundamentally about taking a learning position and attending to what interlocutors teach you. For that reason, in this resulting text, I embrace multivocality and
often include their voices, in their own words, at length. I do, however, separate voices from identities through the use of both pseudonyms and composite narrative to ensure confidentiality.

A few words about my positionality as an ethnographer in a South African high school are warranted. This research topic found me in my own classroom in Newark, NJ through a memorable interaction with a visitor from Launch Schools. As described above, my entry to “the field” was then facilitated by my role as a Fellow in a teacher education exchange where I acted as a mentor/mentee shadowing one alum intern teacher. Through this work, I gained authorization to conduct the research in the manner detailed above. While my initial three stretches at Launch were facilitated by this clear role, during the final year-long research in 2018, I did not officially participate in the program so that I could conduct research full time. This had benefits and drawbacks. While my previous position had grounded my experience in the daily life of a particular teacher, my lack of a functional position besides “researcher” in that last stretch led me to get pulled in a number of directions. Yet it also exposed me to different aspects of the school and freed me up to follow more threads of inquiry. Because they knew me from previous trips, people would ask me to do a variety of things ad hoc like take notes during staff meetings, lead professional development sessions, substitute classes, and chaperone students to activities. They would also invite me along to offsite school tasks like a home visit and admissions interview and meetings with partner organizations in Langa.

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8 Naming is not taken lightly. Particularly across African languages, the name bestowed upon someone can mark time, history, situatedness within family and community, conditions at the time of birth, or a future that is being called into existence. For this reason, ethnographic practices of using pseudonyms are fraught. In choosing pseudonyms for names in Nguni languages, I created a name bank drawn from class lists from schools besides the one I was studying and texts used in my isiXhosa class at UCT. When choosing, I attempted to match meanings with some sort of trait about the participant as I experienced them or association with their actual name (that would not be identifiable). I tried to apply a similar approach across names in other languages (primarily English and Afrikaans).
The founder and director of the school network positioned me to staff as Launch’s “resident researcher,” complete with a write-up in the annual report and a post on the official Facebook page. He invited me to present my research to the leadership team. The Cape Town school leader also arranged sessions for me to explain the research to students and attend a parent meeting for the Grade 12s. I found that this yielded both benefits and challenges I had to navigate. It established my credibility and gained me access to more administrative spaces, for example, a board meeting and a national convening of the leadership teams of all six schools, which gave me valuable insight into decision making. Yet, I became cognizant that it also framed me as an agent of the institution and could make people less willing to share critical perspectives. About midway through the year, I made more attempts to connect with alumni who were not in the Tomorrow’s Leaders program and no longer had official association with the school so that I could invite a broader range of perspectives about the school and its impacts. I also connected with and interviewed teachers who were no longer employed by Launch.

My positionality with students was continuously being negotiated. Because of my previous experience shadowing one of their instructors, they more or less read me as a teacher and extended the appropriate courtesies. However, as explored later in these pages, Launch prizes a relational framework that encourages dialogue across lines of age and authority. As such, students often expressed their curiosity about my life and background. They had been exposed to visitors from schools throughout South Africa and the United States, so my foreignness was not a novelty for them, but they were particularly interested in my experiences as a Black woman in the US and my experiences living in New York, which seemed to have a certain cachet because of movies and music. They also wanted to know more about the details and requirements of
getting a PhD since, reflective of the ethos of the school, many were interested in pursuing terminal degrees. Of course, some students were ambivalent toward me and the research, understandable given that their primary focus was on surviving the high stakes and grueling intensity of matric year and the fact that visitors are a frequent occurrence at Launch, but I did notice more students engaging with me as the year progressed, including one who had initially declined participation in the study, which I discuss in Interlude 3. Over time, I was able to get to know the Grade 12 students more deeply, particularly through participating in open-ended dialogue in their Life Orientation class. Throughout the year, I believe we developed meaningful relationships, reflected by the students asking me to give a speech at their matric ball. One of the students I had originally met as a Grade 8 also asked me to help her prepare. With permission from her father, I accompanied her to get her hair done and pick out a purse to match her outfit. Her invitation offered me a lot of insight about this socially significant stage and event.

Many of my deepest learnings about lived, daily experience in “the field” presented themselves in transit, while navigating the deeply divided geography of Cape Town in taxis, trains, or Ubers. These experiences also caused me to become hyper-conscious of gendered readings of my body. In her piece “Don’t Ride the Bus!: And Other Warnings Women Anthropologists Are Given During Fieldwork,” Bianca Williams (2009) details the safety concerns surrounding gender, sexuality, and mobility for women anthropologists that patriarchy shields our male counterparts from, as well as the ways we are coerced to police our bodies to manage impressions of ourselves and our research, especially if we are traveling alone. As I did not have a car, this was certainly a reality for me, but it also generated opportunities for interlocutors, particularly those who identified as women, to offer advice on how, when, and
where to take public transport and when to make other arrangements (understanding that I had the privileged means to do so), and for them to share their own experiences dealing with the daily reality of navigating patriarchal space. Unfortunately, this also generated opportunities for unpleasant lessons in transport contexts. I do not wish to exceptionalize South Africa, as patriarchy shapes my daily experience in the US as well, but simply to point to one of the ways my gendered positioning shaped my fieldwork.

Both in the school and beyond, my experience as a person from the United States in a body that is read as Black in varying ways in South Africa, particularly in Cape Town, taught me about how categories of race, class, and nationality were understood. Racial categorization is both widely disavowed and widely used in South Africa. Attempts to recover from state imposition of meticulously delineated racial and ethnolinguistic categorizations that differentiated people’s fates have led to a widespread consciousness that “race” is a fiction, made into fact explicitly for purposes of oppression. Yet, these categories are still used by the state for redress, they still shape people’s daily experiences, and people continue to employ them colloquially, revealing that, while race is a construct, its construction makes it real. In daily encounters with people I had not forged deeper relationships with, I found that, particularly as a light-skinned person, there were varying readings of my Blackness in the Cape Town context and the variables seemed to be whether I spoke, how I wore my hair, where I was, and with whom. Each reading yielded entirely different interactions, sometimes in the same encounter, and these were instructive, particularly of the functioning of categories of “Black,” “Coloured,” “African,” and “American,” and the hierarchies therein. In everyday contexts like grocery stores and taxis, people would variously greet, provide service, or spark up conversation in isiXhosa, Afrikaans,
and English indicating these varying readings. In one instance, I attended an initiation homecoming party for a student in Langa. I was sitting with a group of women eating, when a woman who had just arrived thoroughly scolded me in isiXhosa for not wearing a skirt. When I responded we both ended up apologizing profusely, her for misreading my nationality and age, and me, for being ignorant of proper etiquette. In other instances, I was read as “Coloured,” such as when an older woman on the platform as the train to Stellenbosch approached frantically inquired in Afrikaans about the train’s stops and was frustrated at my dumbfounded expression until she heard my US accent and suddenly had a whole new set of questions.

Anytime I spoke, my accent immediately marked my “Americanness” and I was typically read as a Black person with the financial means to travel to South Africa. Fair. Yet, also revealing. Several times, this sparked illuminating conversations about how people understood themselves in relation to the categories “Black,” “Coloured,” and “African,” the politics this signaled, and curiosity about how they would be read in the US. On a few occasions on my first several trips during the Obama presidency, my “Americanness” also sparked uncomfortable conversations with South Africans who identified themselves as White and liberal. They praised the Black American progress they felt Obama demonstrated, juxtaposing it to local corruption in a dog-whistling fashion that positioned me as a “good Black” in comparison to Black South Africans. Due to my research site, the majority of my interactions were with isiXhosa-speaking South Africans who generally identified as Black and African, and alerted me that common practices of categorizing people by ethnolinguistic groupings are also problematic and reflect colonial attempts to subsume diverse peoples and histories under “tribes.” In short, it was complicated. I was constantly learning. I still am.
I found navigating Cape Town’s social terrain to be incredibly complex and people were always teaching me, both subtly and explicitly, about commonly understood boundaries of space and how they mapped on to understandings of race and class. My two major social groups were Black teachers I met through Launch who lived in Cape Flats areas on the periphery of the city, and Black activists and professionals I met through personal contacts who had come from all over the country to attend UCT and stayed in Cape Town, several with the explicit goal of inhabiting and reclaiming what had been constructed as “White space” unapologetically. They often referred to Cape Town as “the colony” to signal its persistent deep segregation. It was hard to bridge these circles. Early faux pas like inviting friends from Launch’s staff to join me at a venue in town in the evening with friends from the latter group alerted me to the hurdles of mobility, the lived effects of Cape Town’s intentionally designed and enduring spatial division.

This brings me, finally, to the lexicon of race and its use in the writing of this dissertation, a charged issue no matter where one lands, given the histories these terms index. Statistics SA, which compiles South African census data, asks people to identify themselves in five racial categories: “Black African,” “White,” “Coloured,” “Indian”/”Asian,” or “Other.” “Black” is commonly used in aggregate to refer to those discriminated against during apartheid. It references not biological fictions of racial linkage, but a political identification forged in anti-apartheid struggle against racism, elaborated in Steve Biko’s “The Definition Of Black Consciousness” (Biko 1971; also see Magaziner 2010, 42–53). I generally follow the lead of my interlocutors in terms of how I use these terms or describe them in any particular instance. But what of capitalization? The complexity deepens. In the US context, some have argued for capitalizing Black and not white (Laws 2020), while others have insisted on capitalizing White
as well to call attention to its constructedness as a racial category and challenge the power wielded by its functioning as an invisible or neutral norm (Ewing 2020). In Race Otherwise: Forging a New Humanism for South Africa (2017), sociologist Zimitri Erasmus raises the added contestedness of the category “Coloured,” which was antagonistically positioned in relation to “African” and “Black” to bolster state imposed racial hierarchies and belie the porousness of these categories. She outlines the intricate ways she makes use of capitalization and inverted commas in her own writing to gesture to these histories. While editing this dissertation, the moment came when I was forced to decide. I informally surveyed South African friends about which terms they capitalize or not, yielding more uncertainty from widely varying responses, each with a passionate explanation. I have landed on capitalizing them all to amplify their constructedness. I do not make any claim that this is the “right” approach or that there is a right approach. In fact, as Eve Ewing (2020) describes, capitalizing “White” in particular departs from my practice heretofore. While these terms have been divergently used for domination and for fighting back, they are all inheritances of histories that shape the conditions I research and write within and against today, and I point to these histories with capitals.

1.3 Dissertation Structure

In this dissertation, I illustrate how the spatial and affective valences of aspiration are both violent and life-saving in the context of Cape Town’s enduring apartheid geography, how deep investments in liberal individualist notions of aspiration compromise commitments to liberatory pedagogies, and how traveling deficit-based education reforms deploy aspiration as a portable market logic. I also point to how youth, families, and educators harness education as both a site and a strategy of struggle, in the process forging a capacity to conspire toward the
inextricable goals of racial and spatial justice. In order to accomplish this, I have organized the dissertation into four chapters, plus an introduction and conclusion. I also include three shorter interludes between the core chapters in order to aid flow and ease readers through the text.

In Chapter 1, “Racial Capitalism, Schooling, and the Politics of Aspiration in South Africa,” I discuss the history of racial capitalism and schooling in South Africa and the spatial history of Langa, the area of my research site. I then elaborate this dissertation’s central concept of “aspiration,” proposing that it must be understood in terms of its spatial and affective dimensions in the South African context and in terms of its functioning as a market logic at both local and global scales. Overall, this chapter presents the historical and theoretical groundings of the dissertation, the main scholarship that informs how I approach aspiration, and how my work uses these theoretical insights to illuminate the ways youth, families, and educators navigate the politics of aspiration in Cape Town.

In Chapter 2, “‘Claiming Cape Town’: Spatial Pedagogy and the Politics of Aspiration,” I explore Launch’s use of outings, particularly an annual first day of school trip, “Claiming Cape Town.” I argue that aspiration, conventionally conceptualized temporally as a striving toward futures, is also a spatial imaginary projecting youth into contested places, especially in cities like Cape Town where histories of racist urban planning and ongoing uneven development maintains spatial divides and makes mobility an unequally distributed resource. I draw on encounters concerning relationships between schooling, locality, and mobility to illustrate that the production of aspiration at Launch is accomplished through what I call “spatial pedagogy,” which teaches youth to transgress apartheid geography, yet remains entrenched in open questions of land and location that animate broader South African politics. This chapter extends
anthropological perspectives on youth futures and the politics of possibility that center temporality by illustrating the spatial dimensions of aspiration. It also reveals how emergent critical geographies of education can be stretched by engaging Black geographies scholarship that foregrounds entanglements between the social production of space and the social construction of race and highlights creative practices that resist and undo geographies of domination and exclusion. I also move beyond the school to glimpse how activist education settings employ spatial pedagogy to elucidate and combat Cape Town’s continued uneven development, illustrating education as both site and strategy of struggle in seeking the inextricable goals of racial and spatial justice.

In Chapter 3, “Breath Work: Trauma Informed Pedagogy and the Capacity to Aspire,” I turn to Life Orientation, a compulsory subject introduced to the national curriculum after the democratic transition to heal the wounds of collective trauma inflicted by apartheid and teach skills and values for a “new” South Africa. Launch’s unique approach to this subject incorporates trauma-informed pedagogy, particularly classroom “breath work” techniques and discussion circles, to facilitate healing from traumas induced by the social and economic realities of racialized inequality. As scholarship on trauma-informed pedagogy largely positions “trauma” as an individualized phenomena generated from violence perpetrated in household, family, or community contexts, it decenters the structural violence of poverty itself and the mundane trauma induced by the uneven life chances of racial capitalism, including the unequal experiences of schooling. At Launch, breath work and other trauma-informed practices are cast as means to increase marginalized youth’s capacity to aspire. Educators and students assert that addressing trauma clears the path to academic success and social mobility, yet they also raise
questions about the limits of progressive pedagogies within contexts of structural inequality that reproduce trauma. Probing the multiple connotations and denotations of “aspiration,” I employ “breath work” conceptually to argue that a key limitation of the school’s attempts to achieve “social transformation” through trauma-informed pedagogy is that its model teaches young people to aspire, or individually breathe and act toward atomized ambitions and outcomes. I contrast this with approaches employed in political education spaces that instead teach youth to “conspire,” or breathe and act together, toward collective visions of radical transformation.

In Chapter 4, “Shareholder Schools: Policy Borrowing and Aspiration as Market Logic,” I extend beyond the school to situate Launch in local, national, and transnational schooling and policy landscapes by centering an ethnographic analysis of a 2018 public hearing for a controversial provincial law that introduced “collaboration schools,” nonstate managed and funded public schools in low-income areas. By detailing Launch’s participation in the policy pilot, analyzing the operations of international entities adapting charter and academy school models from the US and UK for South Africa, and exploring dissent expressed by teachers, families, youth, and activists on the grounds that the policy widens existing gaps between schools, I map out how aspiration functions as a multiscalar market logic that entrenches racial capitalism in education across contexts. I argue that, while comparative education literature on “policy borrowing” examines neoliberal austerity, privatization, and deregulation, it must attend to how the circulation and local articulation of marketized education reforms is shaped by the longue durée of global racial capitalism and its particularities in local contexts. Through highlighting public pedagogies of resistance to marketization of education in the Western Cape, I also point to the dual potential of education to perpetuate or undermine racial capitalism.
The final chapter, “Schooling As Future-Making,” acts as both conclusion and epilogue of my ethnographic study. I summarize my main conclusions and discuss their relevance for scholars, policymakers, educators, and activists.

1.4 Significance

So what? What can researchers, educators, policymakers, and activists gain from reading this text? This study is significant in its interrogation of a core pitch that aids market models in presenting themselves as portable and uncontestable in their infiltration of unequal education landscapes worldwide: aspiration. In selling aspiration as part of their market advantage for Black youth navigating uneven terrain, market-modeled schooling providers in South Africa barter (consciously or not) in a form of neoliberal hope that rehashes rugged individualism.

My dissertation contributes to anthropology and education research on pedagogies of aspiration (Mathew and Lukose 2020), Black studies interrogations of aspiration “in the wake” (Sharpe 2016), and comparative and international education scholarship on education and racial capitalism (Gerrard, Sriprakash, and Rudolph 2021). By working at their intersection, I push each in new directions. I illuminate the racial politics of pedagogies of aspiration that have thus far been underexplored, particularly through my conception of how the spatial pedagogy of aspiration operates in an enduring apartheid geography. Exploring the register of aspiration as breath, I propose how we might create more breathing room for Black youth in hostile atmospheres by moving education away from aspiration and toward a capacity to conspire. Tracing US/UK charter and academy school models’ influence on South African school reform, I reveal how the structural lens that racial capitalism offers us into material inequity in education
worldwide is clarified when we examine how global narratives of “education crisis” and portable logics and pedagogies like aspiration work to entrench inequity.

In its exploration of schooling and the politics of aspiration in Cape Town, this study also offers a thick description of the thoroughly marketized postapartheid South African schooling landscape that yields key insights. Anticapitalist and antiracist scholarship and struggles against market-based education reform have often rested on two core premises that South Africa forces us to scrutinize: 1) the notion of a clear public/private distinction in schooling and 2) the idea that public schools must be “fixed,” “rebuilt,” or “restored” to a former state of glory (Black 2021). By challenging these premises, my examination of Launch and the larger schooling landscape of Cape Town and South Africa offers urgent insights into broader debates about education reform and marketization across contexts. Exploring the blurring of public/private distinctions can sharpen the analyses that scholars, educators, parents/caregivers, and activists use to apprehend the cunning maneuvering of market forces and help them mount more agile resistance. At the same time, “state” education has never truly amounted to a “public” education. Probing commonplace temporal understandings of the decline or progress of public schools highlights the roles state school systems have repeatedly played in shaping domination, exclusion, or differentiated inclusion for racialized peoples, even as they provided free, “public” education for those deemed “White”, and illuminates how this gets reworked presently by collusion between markets and states that plays out on grounds already shaped by these histories. Overall, I hope this work provokes a grappling with collective aspirations for what an antiracist, anticapitalist, and truly “public” education might look like and how we can build it.
It may seem like a misplacement of time and resources to write an entire dissertation troubling a nice thing like aspiration during a moment when a pandemic continues to claim lives, “war time” feels infinite, and inequality deepens. Surely, there are more pressing issues an education scholar can take on. Yet, I write in a tradition of anthropology of education scholarship that problematizes core fictions like “success” and “failure” (Varenne and McDermott 2008) that plague schooling and society, constantly directing our attention toward what’s wrong with students, their teachers, their families, and their neighbors, rather than what’s wrong with the conditions they all work within and against. Notions like “aspiration” are always at the ready as a tool to redirect analyses of educational “crisis” to individual failings or triumphs rather than structural inequality, but I also look at what students, families, and educators do with aspiration that surprises us, how they repurpose it in unpredictable ways.

At the same time, writing about Black aspiration is deeply personal. I aspire to write in a tradition of Black scholarship and struggle that has wrested radical potential from the notion of aspiration. In the context of South Africa, Steve Biko (1971) tethered the very political definition of Blackness to aspiration, stating, “We have defined Blacks as those who are by law or tradition politically, economically and socially discriminated against as a group in the South African society and identifying themselves as a unit in the struggle towards the realization of their aspirations.” W.E.B. Du Bois (1902) famously argued that, in the context of Black education, aspiration “must not lightly be dealt with”. While aspiration has been marshaled as part of the survivance of Black peoples worldwide against domination, the strain of aspiring in atmospheres where “we were never meant to survive” (Lorde 1978) has tolls. For this reason, my dissertation lingers also on the perilous aspects of aspiration: the dangers of glorifying resilience, striving,
and working “ten times harder.” Ultimately, I draw on the path-breaking work of Christina Sharpe (2016) to stand firmly in the complexity that, “in the multiple Black everydays of the wake” in which we live, “aspiration is both violent and life-saving” (113).
Chapter 1: Racial Capitalism, Schooling, and the Politics of Aspiration in South Africa

“Schooling is seen to be, and is in fact, so inseparably part of the total situation of unequal life chances which defines racial capitalism…”
—Neville Alexander

“Ten Years of Educational Crisis: The Resonance of 1976”

This chapter presents the historical and theoretical groundings of the dissertation, the main scholarship that informs how I approach aspiration, and how my work uses these theoretical insights to illuminate the ways youth, educators, and families navigate the politics of aspiration in Cape Town. I begin with a discussion of how racial capitalism has historically shaped schooling in South Africa and how it persists in the accelerating marketization of the postapartheid school system. Next, I outline the spatial history of Langa, the area of Cape Town where I primarily conducted research. Finally, I elaborate the theoretical framing of this dissertation’s central concept of “aspiration,” proposing that it must be understood both in terms of its spatial and affective dimensions in the South African context and also in terms of its functioning as a market logic at both local and transnational scales of racial capitalism.

1.1 The Marketplace of Schools

The first school9 in Southern Africa opened at the Cape in 1658 to teach people enslaved by the Dutch East India Company European language, Christianity, and subservience (Molteno 1984). Schooling was “introduced as part of the process whereby colonialism brought the subcontinent into the emergent world capitalist system” (Molteno 1984, 48). Colonial and

9 I note the distinction between “school” and “education” here in an effort not to negate generations of formal and informal indigenous educational practices that predate and outlive colonialism.
apartheid education were constituent to hierarchically racialized power relations. Free schools in British colonies later established in what is now South Africa typically served White children, while limited schooling for Black children was available largely from missionaries driven by “civilizing” agendas (Comaroff 1996; Pretorius 2019; Soudien 2016a). Liberal education administrators in South Africa’s Union period advocated borrowing a model of “adapted education” developed for Black students in the US South to shape education for Black South Africans (Fleisch 1995; Loram 1917; Magaziner 2016). The right-wing National Party intensified the adapted approach to fulfill an apartheid ideology of “separate development” (Kros 2010). Through the Bantu Education Act of 1953, schools calcified hierarchies of constructed racial difference by preparing people for disparate locations in socioeconomic order (Kallaway 2002; Nkomo 1990). Post-1994 reform for a “new” South Africa included unification of nineteen racially separate education departments into a national department; compulsory schooling through Grade 9; and new curricula (Soudien 2016a). Access has improved but equal distribution of quality remains elusive (Fiske and Ladd 2004).

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10 It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to provide a detailed history of the modern South African state, but brief context is necessary. European colonial expansion in what is now South Africa began in 1652 with the Dutch East India Company’s establishment of a waystation at Table Bay (located at the southern tip of Africa and forming the harbor of what is now Cape Town). This evolved into the Cape Colony settlement, which was officially taken over by British settlers in 1806 and incorporated into the British empire. Settler dispersal into South Africa’s interior led to the establishment of the Natal, Transvaal, and Orange Free State colonies. European conquest was by no means an uninterrupted or totalizing process, as diverse African polities that inhabited the region for thousands of years before European arrival mounted sustained resistance. Additionally, conquest was marked by rivalry between descendents of Dutch settlers (Afrikaners) and the British for political and economic control (particularly of the emergent mining industry) that came to a head in the South African (Anglo-Boer) War of 1899-1902. British victory led to the unification of the four colonies into a single state, the Union of South Africa, in 1910. This fixed the boundaries of modern South Africa and consolidated and entrenched White political power. While systematic and legalized racism deepened during the Union period, particularly in the Natives Land Act of 1913 that banned African land ownership outside of designated areas known as reserves, the National Party which rose to power in 1948 and ruled until 1994 intensified segregation and Black disenfranchisement through formal state ideology and policies of apartheid, translated from Afrikaans “apartness.” (Worden 2012)
Today, a bifurcated system perpetuates colonial and apartheid legacies: high performing schools serve the wealthiest quarter of society, and a less effective system serves the remainder—overwhelmingly Black and impoverished. Of every one hundred students that start Grade R, fifty drop out before Grade 12, forty pass the matric exam, and twelve pass at a level qualifying them for university (Spaull 2013). Of these, less than half graduate, with White completion rates on average fifty percent higher than Black rates, and under five percent of Black youth completing higher education (Council on Higher Education 2013). While schools are seen as potential sites of redress and cohesion, they “propagate, rather than mitigate, inequality” (UNISA 2012) and “disparity remains the order of the day in relation to class, language, gender, race, and location” (Soudien 2016b, 75).

The global neoliberal turn and its market logics shaped South Africa’s transition, compromising ANC commitments to redistributive macroeconomic policy and provision of social services, including education (Alexander 2002; Magubane 2004; Vally 2007; Worden 2012). Pointing to the growth of the Black middle class despite persisting inequality, some argued that the result was a shift from race to class apartheid (Bond 2004; Seekings and Nattrass 2005), rehashing longstanding global debates over the race-class nexus (Goldberg 2008). Theories of racial capitalism, which resurged with the 2000 reprinting of Cedric Robinson’s 1983 text Black Marxism, offer important interventions. Robinson challenged orthodox Marxism’s underestimation of how “the logics of racism fundamentally shape both capital accumulation and the role of the state” (Kelley 2020, xv). He argued that race and other socially constructed differences are not incidental to global capitalist order, but constituent of it (Robinson 2020). Capitalism, everywhere and everywhen, structures power through the racialization of difference.
Pointing to its historical emergence out of a feudal order already shaped by “intra-European racialism” (2020, 68), Robinson illustrated that “capitalism has always operated within a system and ideology that assigns differential value to human life and labor” (Kelley 2020, xv). Robinson (2020) then traced the inextinguishable “struggles of Black people for a different social order” (68)—the Black radical tradition.

Robinson wrote parts of Black Marxism while in England and likely drew inspiration from exposure to exiled antiapartheid intellectuals’ efforts to apprehend the political economy of apartheid white supremacy (Kelley 2017; Hudson 2018; Al-Bulushi 2020). The concept of racial capitalism emerged from race-class debates in 1970s South Africa that took on a particular urgency as scholars and activists waging struggle sought dynamic analyses that avoided “analytical dead ends” (Alexander 2013, 122) of race or class reductionism (Magubane 1979; Posel 1983; Wolpe 1988). While Robinson’s work powerfully challenged the perceived exceptionalism of the South African case by theorizing capitalism’s constituent racialism across time and space, I argue that examining contemporary racial capitalism from the particularities of South Africa and through the lens of education is fruitful for understanding global workings of its current neoliberal variant.

The work of Neville Alexander, an activist, scholar, and teacher who was imprisoned on Robben Island with Nelson Mandela, is instructive in this regard. Alexander relied on the concept of racial capitalism to encourage a more robust race analysis in South African Marxism and a deeper class analysis in Black Consciousness, while rejecting liberal claims that an evolved capitalism would eventually erode the racial structure of apartheid. “It is an illusion...to believe

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11 Robben Island is an island off the Cape that was used as a prison for anticolonial and antiapartheid rebels. Most infamously, it was the site of 18 of the 27 years of Nelson Mandela’s imprisonment. It is now a World Heritage Site.
that capitalism can continue to exist on South African soil without the shadow of racism” (No Sizwe 1979, 64). In the wake of the transition up until his 2012 death—which occurred on the heels of the Marikana massacre\textsuperscript{12} that gruesomely proved his forebodings—he wrote and organized against ongoing racial capitalism in the “new” South Africa. Positioned on the global stage as a political miracle because of a “bloodless revolution,” (Mandela 1999)\textsuperscript{13} South Africa would become an “ordinary country,” Alexander argued, with lessons for the globe about the capacity for racial capitalism’s barbarity to persist under multiracial liberal democracy (2002). Foreshadowing the contemporary reckoning with rainbow nationalism, he asked “whether or not the promise of the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow is anything more than an illusion” (2002, 145), ultimately concluding the latter, since “the apartheid-capitalist system has simply given way to the post-apartheid-capitalist system” (2002, 64). Eradication of racial capitalism and its endemic oppressions, Alexander (1983) insisted, cannot be accomplished through multiracial or even nonracial capitalism, only through antiracism, which requires anti-capitalism. Antiracism “not only involves the denial of ‘race’ but also opposition to the capitalist structures for the perpetuation of which the ideology and theory of ‘race’ exist” (1983).

Education’s dual potential to perpetuate or undermine racial capitalism was central to Alexander’s (1990) analysis: “Schooling is…inseparably part of the total situation of unequal life chances which defines racial capitalism” (43). In interrogating the circulation of equity-framed marketized education interventions, his contribution to race-class debates “is still relevant today

\textsuperscript{12} On August 16, 2012, thirty-four Black miners striking for better working conditions were shot dead by the South African Police Service on behalf of Lonmin, a British company. It was the most lethal use of state force since 1976.

\textsuperscript{13} In his last nationally televised interview as president, Nelson Mandela stated, “We have confounded the prophets of doom and achieved a bloodless revolution” (SABC 1999). This framing has been challenged on the grounds of the vast amount of violence both in the transition itself—over 16,000 people were killed in political violence just in the period from 1990–94 (Besteman 2008, 9)—and the countless lost over generations of antiapartheid struggle.
insofar as scholars, activists, political leaders and ‘ordinary’ people have grappled with the question of whether capitalism, in spite of its complicity in upholding the racial order of white domination and privilege, can still provide a realistic framework for redressing the legacy of poverty as a consequence of ‘racial’ inequality” (Cloete 2014, 35). Marketized education reform has reorganized schooling in societies around the globe (Plank and Sykes 2003; Ball 2012), described by South African scholar activist Salim Vally as “the pursuit of a global ideological agenda rationalized on the ostensible (and often real) failure of governments to supply good quality public education to the majority of its citizenry” (Vally 2019, 238). Marketization of social services is ironically pitched as an invisible hand that can level the uneven terrain that racial capitalism has had a visible hand in creating. Rather than flattening the inequities associated with socially constructed differences like race, gender, class, and ability, marketization is enabled by, works through, and reconstitutes them (Hunter 2019; McMillan Cottom 2017; Ndimande 2016; Picower and Mayorga 2015; Rooks 2017; Tikly and Mabogoane 1997). In contexts where state-enforced segregation is no longer the engine of racial hierarchies, marketization maintains them. This plays out in relation to national and local histories.

Some argue that South Africa’s intensely competitive marketplace of schools was the “unintended consequence” of postapartheid policies actually aimed at redress (Woolman and Fleisch 2006, 2009). The South African Constitution of 1996, rare in its guaranteeing of socioeconomic rights, places an unqualified duty on the state to ensure that “everyone has the right to a basic education” (Section 29(1); McConnachie, Skelton, McConnachie 2017). Several laws give content to this right, but some components intended to target apartheid legacies have had complex effects. For example, while the National Education Policy Act of 1996 preserves
school zones, it states that “a learner who lives outside the feeder zone is not precluded from seeking admission at whichever school he or she chooses” (Woolman and Fleisch 2009, 27). This softening of zones was in line with a new constitutionally-guaranteed freedom of movement in a context still shaped by apartheid “group areas.” It created de facto school choice resulting in Black children with means traveling farther distances to access schools formerly closed to them (de Kadt et al 2013; Posel and Graspa 2017; Woolman and Fleisch 2006). Yet while sought after fee-paying public schools can admit learners outside of their feeder zones, they are not required to, resulting in a situation where they can admit learners from outside who can pay fees, but also use feeder zones as mechanisms of exclusion (Woolman and Fleisch 2009; Feldman 2020).

The South African Schools Act of 1996 (SASA) delineates school organization, governance, and funding and enshrines school governing body (SGB) autonomy, also with varied effects. Composed of parents, learners, educators, and community members, SGBs are responsible for everyday school management and setting policies related to discipline, fees, language, and more (Mansfield-Barry and Stwayi 2017). The introduction of SGBs to all public schools is often framed as a response to antiapartheid movements for “people’s education”, which included calls for local control of schools. Their structure builds on a tradition of grassroots parent-teacher-student associations (PTSAs) (Motala and Pampallis 2018). However, SGBs also have another history in negotiations made during the transition and, in practice, they function at elite public schools formerly classified as White to set prohibitive fees and admission criteria (Karlsson 2002; Sayed et al 2020).

Challenging the “unintended consequences” argument, some read postapartheid marketization as the result of a “negotiated settlement” of schooling, in line with the larger
economic settlement—a series of compromises that limited redistribution of resources by allowing the White minority and the global neoliberal thrust toward market-friendly governance to shape the terms of transition (Alexander 2002; Christie 1995; Christie and McKinney 2017; Vally 2007). The advent of marketization in South African schooling must be understood in relation to the complicated negotiation of desegregation in formerly White public schools and how it shaped restructuring of the system as a whole (Tikly and Mabogoane 1997). While at the time they accounted for only 1,860 of 25,162 South African schools and only 8.5% of students (Tikly and Mabogoane 1997), understanding how historically White schools were able to set the pace of change is key to understanding how the “hegemony of white control was maintained during the transition and extended under the new government of national unity after 1994” (Christie and McKinney 2017, 9).

Even once the “doors of learning” were opened, formerly White schools were offered a considerable amount of autonomy in determining which pupils could enter. In 1990, amidst heightening political pressure due to the unbanning of the ANC, the apartheid government allowed White schools to vote on three (later four) different models of desegregation (named Clase Models after the “White” education minister). The models allowed for varying degrees of desegregation as long as schools remained at least 51% White, but all emphasized “the preservation of the ‘traditional values and ethos’ of white schools, rather than their transformation” (Christie 1995, 49). By 1995, 94% had been declared “Model C,” state-aided, semi-private institutions that received subsidies to cover salaries of education department appointed staff and about 80% of operating costs. Power was devolved to school governing bodies to determine admissions, appoint additional staff, set fees, and raise remaining funds. This
model allowed formerly White schools to shape the terms of their desegregation and also introduced market relations into the daily running of public schools that were responsible for their own financial management and enrollment (Christie 1995).

While racial categorization of schools was abolished in the establishment of a single national system, the National Party negotiated “special provisions” to protect the status of White schools during the restructuring (Department of Education 1995, 67; Christie and McKinney 2017). The South African Schools Act (SASA) made SGB autonomy law, but was later amended to create “a two-tier SGB structure with those serving poorer schools having limited management control and autonomy” (Sayed et al 2020, 3). The ANC rationalized compromises on the grounds that allowing formerly White schools to charge fees would prevent a White exodus from public schools and enable redistribution of state funds to the poorest schools (Hunter 2019). Yet, these compromises have also contributed to a blurring of public-private distinctions and maintained racist exclusion and privilege in a postapartheid dispensation, even if privilege appears deracialized due to selective incorporation of Black students from families with the means to pay. Control over admissions allows schools to uphold coercive assimilation to their “ethos”\(^{14}\) and high fees allow them to hire extra teachers appointed by the SGB (as opposed to the education department) to ensure low learner to teacher ratios. The term “Model C” is also still widely used to refer to all formerly White schools or to signify Whiteness more broadly. It is a color-evasive term that “subtly evokes race” (Hunter 2019, 96). During my research, several

\(^{14}\) There are myriad accounts of Black students’ experiences of coercive assimilation at formerly White schools, including prohibitions on speaking African languages and racist hair policies. For examples, see Zulaikha Patel’s account of protesting her school’s hair policy (United Nations 2021), Panashe Chigumadzi’s Ruth First Lecture on navigating Model C education and the label of “coconut” (2015), and Milisuthando Bongela’s forthcoming film on the psychological effects of racism on Model C–educated Black South Africans (2019).
students or parents told me that Launch provides a “Model C education at a low cost” or was seen as a “Model C school in the township.” “Model C” schools “play an important hegemonic role in a narrative of progress. They are accorded the status of being the ‘ideal type’ post-apartheid school, with the assumption that schools of this type are available for all in some unspecified future, as long as principals, teachers, students and parents work hard enough” (Christie and McKinney 2017, 9).

The complex public-private mix of South Africa’s contemporary school system as a whole was shaped by the transition era compromise to grant public schools autonomy to charge tuition and forgo the option of free universal basic education (Languille 2016). Marketization has taken hold at all levels, not simply advantaging families on the basis of income, but working through racialized difference, as “cultural signals of whiteness are formative of the schooling market” (Hunter 2019, 25). There is an intensely competitive racialized market for spots in the top tier of public schools, and Black students are admitted based on ability to pay and “ability to be assimilated” (Hunter 2019, 4). Fee-charging schools must offer remissions and, once admitted, no learner can legally be excluded on the basis of fees, but schools have practices of excluding families who may be unaware of existing laws, e.g. by printing materials only in English (Hunter 2019). Marketization has also mushroomed in families exercising choice by moving from local schools formerly classified African to those classified Coloured or Indian and in intra-township movement to schools with higher exam scores (Fataar 2015; Hunter 2019; Soudien 2004). Meanwhile, 65% of students attend no-fee government schools facing challenges of overcrowding, poor infrastructure, and more (Villette 2016). The state categorizes public schools in five quintiles based on the income levels of surrounding areas, one being lowest and
five highest (Launch’s area is quintile two). Postapartheid expenditure has been reversed to a “pro-poor” scheme funding schools differentially based on income level. National policy abolished fees in quintile one and two schools in 2007 and followed suit with quintile three schools in 2009. However, private contributions to the wealthiest public schools negate redistributive expenditure and maintain a funding gap (Ahmed and Sayed 2009; Hunter 2019). In 2017, the lowest income no-fee school in the Western Cape received R871 more state funding per pupil than the richest category school. Yet quintile five public schools charged as much as R45,000 for that year (Western Cape Government 2017a, 169).

South Africa’s Constitution states, “Everyone has the right to establish and maintain, at their own expense, independent educational institutions.” A constitutional protection for independent schools is rare compared to other democracies. It directly relates to apartheid, when the National Party forced mission schools, the main providers of Black schooling up until 1948, to comply with regulations or close; meanwhile, many religiously-affiliated White independent schools defied segregation laws by admitting Black learners, particularly in the wake of the 1976 Soweto Uprisings (Christie 1990; Hofmeyr and Lee 2004). In 2019, about 12.5 million students attended 23,076 public schools while 632,443 students attended 1,922 independent schools (Department of Basic Education 2020). Put differently, about eight percent of schools were independent and they served about five percent of students. While relatively small, this sector is rapidly accelerating, and has more than doubled since 2000 (Hunter 2019). Like the public system, the independent sector is bifurcated. A small tier of elite schools can cost over R200,000 per year without boarding—more than a three-year degree at the University of Cape Town (Thwala 2021)—and these schools often assess students based on the International Exam Board
so they can study overseas. A larger tier of self-described “low-fee” or “affordable” private schools has accounted for the lion’s share of postapartheid growth (Hofmeyr and Lee 2004; Languille 2016). Low-fee schools are greatly heterogeneous and form two categories. Nonprofit schools (like Launch) are funded by individual and corporate donations. They receive subsidies below a certain fee level, rationalized by the state on the grounds that they serve “families in poorer, working class and middle class communities” and thus “[free] up funds for development of the public school system” (Western Cape Government 2017b). For-profit schools are run as commercial chains, such as the Pearson-backed Spark Schools, Pioneer, ADvTECH, and Curro. Curro, the oldest and biggest chain, founded in 1998, now represents 178 schools and is traded on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (Pillay 2022), bringing new meaning to “investing” in children’s futures.

While Launch had a fee of R400 per month in 2018, Curro had different school tiers with varying fee levels ranging from R1,900 to R8,650 per month (Mashego 2019). In a context where half the population lives below the upper bound poverty line of R992 per month (Stats SA 2019), both schools are billed as “low-fee” or “affordable.” These ambiguous terms function as discursive instruments allowing private school providers, choice and competition policy advocates, and pro-market state actors to frame the expansion of private schooling as a form of social justice by avoiding the question, “affordable to whom?” (Languille 2016, 536). Another discursive move is the conflation between “township” and “poor,” as private schools’ increasing location in townships bolsters their image as equity ventures serving the poorest learners, when in fact there is considerable stratification in townships that has only accelerated since 1994 (Languille 2016). Low-fee private school provision, framed by the Constitutional Court in 2013
as a “savings” for the “public purse” (Languille 2016), is actually then being shouldered by the precarious Black lower middle classes, while absolving the state from addressing the “direct and vicious relationship between the rise of private schools and the deterioration of learning conditions in public schools” (Languille 2016, 535). While transition compromises were rationalized on preventing White exodus to private schools, the resulting cleavage in the public system between wealthy and under-resourced schools has produced a low-fee private schooling boom driven by Black exodus from learning conditions unconducive to their aspirations for social mobility (Languille 2016). Low-fee private schools “organise a transfer of the cost of education from the state to households from low to medium middle class groups…the most affluent segments of the society are implicitly cleared of their responsibility for financially supporting quality public education for all” (Languille 2016, 537).

In 2017, 45% of schools in the Western Cape charged fees; 60% of all schools charged less than R800 per year, and 10% above R18,980 per year (Motala and Carel 2019, 77). In this context, the latest market reform move in South Africa has been the Western Cape Education Department’s controversial piloting of “collaboration” and “donor-funded” public schools

15 Colloquial use of language to signal school caliber is complex. SASA names two types of schools, “public” and “independent.” However, I noticed a distinct use of “public” and “government” to refer to different tiers of state schools. While formerly White state schools were described as “Model C,” “ex–Model C,” or “public,” no-fee state schools in townships or less affluent areas were often referred to as “government” schools. Several Langa parents who sent their children to ex–Model Cs or to state schools formerly designated “Coloured” also called these “multiracial” schools. I noticed a use of both “independent” and “private” to refer to what SASA calls “independent” schools, but more interchangeably. Previous apartheid legislation used the term “private.” Occasionally people used “traditional independent” to refer to institutions that date back to the earliest 19th century church schools. A few times, interlocutors explicitly used “White independent” to signal particular histories. By contrast, people usually referred to newer, for-profit independent chains like Curro and ADvTECH as “private” schools. Launch brought all this complexity together. Students, teachers, and families typically referred to it as either a “private” or “semi-private” school (the latter signaling its state subsidy), but the school marketing and website all described Launch as “independent.” This could simply be a use of the official legal category, but could also be a signal to the prestige of Launch’s relationships with older, elite schools and its membership in the Independent Schools Association of Southern Africa (ISASA), the largest and oldest independent school organization in Southern Africa. Curro, the largest private school provider in South Africa, is notably not a member of ISASA or the National Alliance of Independent Schools Associations (NAISA), the other major independent school organization.
modeled on US/UK charter and academy schools, an “innovation” that pro-market policymakers hope will spread to other provinces (DA Gauteng 2021). Legislation passed in 2018 that allows nonprofit and private entities to manage and fund low-performing no-fee government schools has been portrayed as a silver bullet to end inequality, but deepens marketization in the lowest tier of the public system (Hunter 2018). Overall, compromises made in the public sector and the growth of low-fee schools have resulted in a public-private blurring where elite public schools charge higher fees than private schools serving lower-income families and public-private partnerships are reshaping no-fee government schools, resulting in the maintenance of a deeply unequal, racialized school system. While studies on the racial politics of postapartheid schooling have proliferated since 1994, with a focus on desegregation of formerly White schools (Carter 2012; Dolby 2001; Hunter 2019; Soudien 2007, 2012; Tihanyi 2006), I extend this conversation through a focus on how racial capitalism shapes low-fee schooling and the politics of aspiration in a township setting.

1.2 A World Cut in Two: Langa Township and Cape Town

In South Africa, as elsewhere, the scientific fiction of race has been institutionalized as social fact in large part through the partitioning of geography. The synonymous systems of colonialism and apartheid were bifurcations of space, what Frantz Fanon (2004) called “a world cut in two” (38; see also Mamdani 1996; More 2017). Writing in 1961, shortly after apartheid police murdered sixty-nine pass law protesters in the 1960 Sharpeville massacre, and three additional people from Langa Township during solidarity actions, which sparked 30,000 people to march on Cape Town, Fanon observed in *The Wretched of the Earth*,
The colonial world is a world divided into compartments. It is probably unnecessary to recall the existence of native quarters and European quarters, of schools for natives and schools for Europeans; in the same way we need not recall apartheid in South Africa. Yet, if we examine closely this system of compartments, we will at least be able to reveal the lines of force it implies. This approach to the colonial world, its ordering and its geographical layout will allow us to mark out the lines on which a decolonized society will be reorganized. (2004, 37–38)

Following Fanon, a brief examination of how this compartmentalization of space has operated in the urban context of Cape Town is key to understanding the persistence of unequal landscapes of schooling in the present, to framing contemporary efforts to decolonize geography by working across it in disruptive ways, and to understanding aspiration as a spatial imaginary.

Langa, the township served by Launch’s oldest school, was established in 1927 prior to apartheid and is central to the history of spatial violence and resistance in Cape Town (Musemwa 1993). “Three closely-related housing projects – Ndabeni, Pinelands, and Langa – are key examples of the conundrum of colonial desires...the consequences of which are written across the cracked face of Cape Town still to this day” (Coetzer 2009, 2). All three areas were once part of the same tract, Uitvlugt farm, a sandy expanse variously converted into a British army camp, prison for anticolonial rebel King Langalibalele (who would later be banished to Robben Island and become Langa’s namesake), and forest reserve of pines imported by the Cape Colony to block Cape Flats sands from drifting into town (Coetzer 2009). In 1901, part of Uitvlugt became Cape Town’s first “native location.” Locations were “segregated and separately administered residential areas for African people,” a spatial technology of control that came to play “a central role in the apparatuses of domination upon which the modern South African state was to depend” (Robinson 1990, 135, 157).
Although the idea of tightly controlled peri-urban “locations” for black city dwellers had already emerged in policy discourse, when the bubonic plague pandemic hit Cape Town, the Public Health Amendment Act of 1897 provided legal justification for forcibly removing seven thousand Black laborers from town to hastily constructed barracks enclosed by barbed wire and patrolled by guards, what later became known as Ndabeni (Bickford-Smith 2001; Swanson 1995). Planning of the area as a “governmental strategy for rural, migrant labour control” had already been underway, but the outbreak led to its rapid development (Coetzer 2009).

Subsequently, under the Native Reserve Location Act of 1902, the Cape colonial government forced Africans to live in locations. “Sanitation syndrome” was but one element of a broader transcontinental pseudoscientific doctrine in colonial contexts such as Cape Town, Calcutta, Dublin, and New York that increasingly portrayed segregation as panacea for urban problems and a basic tenet of sound city planning (Bickford-Smith 2016). As race “science” spread through the colonies, by the end of the 19th century many Whites “were urging that, as in the southern United States, blacks—coloureds as well as Africans—in Cape Town should be barred from trams, cabs and even sidewalks” (Saunders 1979, 16; see also Dubow 1995).

After the 1910 formation of the Union of South Africa, which consolidated white supremacy through the unification of four colonies after prolonged war between British and Afrikaner settlers, Black South Africans were subjected to new national legislation and establishment of “native locations” proliferated. The 1923 Native Urban Areas Act established tighter control of African mobility through pass laws. Racialized fears and expanding industry led to razing of the overcrowded Ndabeni location, forcibly removing inhabitants three miles farther from the city to the newly established and carefully planned Langa township in 1927.
Located at the far reaches of the original Uitvlugt tract, Langa incorporated panoptic design features that would come to characterize townships all over the country. It was enclosed by a fence meant to “protect” the adjacent forest, and had a single point of entry and exit (Coetzer 2009; de Satgé and Watson 2018). In that adjacent forest, Pinelands, a Whites-only suburb planned as a peaceful green environment complete with a racial buffer zone, had been simultaneously underway (Coetzer 2009). As anxieties rose in the interwar period about the ineffectiveness of segregationist attempts to control the mobility of African workers and their families, the influence of European and North American modernist urban planning and architecture—particularly Ebenezer Howard's garden city movement and Le Corbusier's Ville Radieuse—circulated through imperial networks (Demissie 2004). Langa and Pinelands were the first attempt at professional town planning in South Africa, both designed by English architect Albert John Thompson, a visiting lecturer at the Cape Institute for Architecture who also worked as a town planner for the British colonial government in Lagos, Nigeria (Coetzer 2004).

As South Africa moved toward apartheid, deployment of modernist dogma and design principles of spatial ordering accelerated toward racist ends. While scholarship has dispelled the myth that segregation and removals in Cape Town were introduced by apartheid policy (Bickford-Smith 2001), the National Party’s 1948 victory nevertheless marked a significant turning point in racial and spatial differentiation. The Population Registration Act of 1950 formalized racial categories and hierarchies by officially requiring South Africans to register as “White,” “Native,” “Coloured,” and, later, “Indian,” in order to allow for more complete segregation. The Group Areas Act of 1950 authorized the state to enforce rigid control of “the
use, occupation, and ownership of land and buildings on a racial basis, and emphasised separate residential areas, educational services, and other amenities for the different race groups” (Maharaj 2019, 43). Particularly, urban areas that had managed to remain integrated were targeted. For example, Cape Town’s District Six neighborhood was destroyed, and sixty thousand people were forcibly removed to undeveloped areas in the Cape Flats. The apartheid government restricted movement through pass laws and reified difference through intricate spatial ordering, designing town layouts according to race and class distinctions and, within racial categories, even allocating residence according to ethnic groupings, the boundaries and definition of which were determined by the state (Maharaj 2019). Langa played a central role in sustained resistance through residents’ participation in nationwide anti-pass campaigns, perhaps most notably in March 1960, when the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) led thirty thousand Langa and Nyanga residents to march on Cape Town’s police headquarters, sparking the apartheid government to declare a state of emergency and ban the ANC and the PAC (Kgosana 1988).

An important strand of South African scholarship has offered critical analyses of geographies of domination and been attentive to resistance (Lester 2003; Western 1981). In Langa specifically, Mamphela Ramphele’s ethnography *A Bed Called Home* (1993) documented life in the confining migrant labor hostels, exploring “the impact of the various dimensions of space [physical, political-economic, ideological-intellectual, and psycho-social] on the processes of both transformation and replication of particular forms of power relations” (2). Ramphele (1993) further describes how pass laws and the “influx control” measures of fines, imprisonment, and deportation failed to stem the urban aspirations of black women in particular, who were arrested in greater numbers than men in the Cape and whose resistance and resilience
eventually led to the 1986 Abolition of Influx Control Act. In the face of enduring apartheid geography, insurgent spatial practices persist in the postapartheid dispensation, with many insights to offer the burgeoning scholarly turn toward engagement with Black geographies (Hawthorne 2019; McKittrick and Woods 2007; Reese 2019; Shabazz 2015; Summers 2019).

Commenting on the enduring division of the city, Edgar Pieterse, director of the African Centre for Cities at the University of Cape Town, explains, “Cape Town was conceived with a white-only centre, surrounded by contained settlements for the black and coloured labour forces to the east, each hemmed in by highways and rail lines, rivers and valleys, and separated from the affluent white suburbs by protective buffer zones of scrubland” (Wainwright 2014). Rails, roads, and maps were designed to cut off, rather than connect, space (de Satgé and Watson 2018). Three decades after the democratic transition, undoing apartheid geography remains a formidable challenge, especially given a negotiated settlement that cohered with a global neoliberal turn, allowing for ostensible deracialization of access to privilege without the fundamental dismantling of racial capitalism. “Released from the grip of the apartheid state, the ‘free market’ has been set loose on existing inequitable urban conditions, consolidating [South African] cities into evermore divided and segregated spaces” (Marks and Bezzoli 2001, 29). In Cape Town this has followed a particular course that maintains the city’s construction as a “White” space with unequal access to housing and service delivery on its peripheries (Makhulu 2015). In her work on spatial interventions of creative protest, Nomusa Makhubu (2017) has argued, “it is as if the city refuses the ‘post’ in post-apartheid, refuses to be rewritten”. In this context, I explore the roles that education, in and beyond schools, plays in rewriting uneven geographies.
1.3 Navigating Social Space: Spatial Pedagogy and the Politics of Aspiration

In this research, I interrogate the politics and pedagogies of aspiration in a low-fee school and the larger landscape in which it is embedded. I have built upon Appadurai (2013) in defining “aspiration” as a capacity to navigate social space toward desired futures. In elaborating the concept of aspiration, I must therefore start by pausing to consider: what is “space”?

The tendency to conceptualize space as a natural backdrop can mystify the relations and structures that produce it, obscuring the profound impact it has on shaping subjectivity and action. The late 20th century spatial turn in critical theory established that, rather than a container in which activities of humans and nonhumans unfold, space, its organization, and its meanings are evolving products and producers of social action and relations (de Certeau 1984; Harvey 1973; Lefebvre 1991; Massey 1994; Said 1978; Soja 1980, 1989). Two insights from this turn that are key to understanding how Launch operates within a fractured schooling landscape are that space is a matter of both practice and imagination, both of which shape material relations.

In *Social Justice in the City*, David Harvey (1973) offers a practice-oriented definition of space, arguing that “The problem of the proper conceptualization of space is resolved through human practice with respect to it...The question ‘what is space?’ is therefore replaced by the question ‘how is it that different human practices create and make use of distinctive conceptualizations of space?’”(13). Harvey extends C. Wright Mills’s concept of the sociological imagination to offer a theory of spatial consciousness. The “geographic imagination” enables the individual to recognize the role of space and place in his own biography, to relate the spaces he sees around him, and to recognize how transactions between individuals and between organizations are affected by the space that separates them. It allows him to recognize the relationship that exists between him and his neighborhood, his territory...It allows him to judge the relevance of events in other places (on other
peoples’ turf)...It allows him also to fashion and use space creatively and to appreciate the meaning of the spatial forms created by others. (Harvey 1973, 24)

As Edward Said illustrated in his germinal work *Orientalism* (1978), the geographic imagination, or what he called “imaginative geography,” has also worked to create and sustain notions of racialized difference that in turn shape relations of power.

Across contexts there has been a constitutive relationship between the social construction of race and the social production of space. Postcolonial, feminist, and Black studies scholars have been particularly attentive to this relationship, detailing how geographies of domination and exclusion and their ongoing hierarchical relations constrain the possibilities and aspirations of racialized subjects. These scholars variously detail how systems of colonialism, slavery, imperialism, patriarchy, apartheid and segregation, citizenship, and carcerality operate as spatial forms (Fanon 2004; Gilmore 2007; hooks 1984; Lipsitz 2011; McKittrick 2006; Ramphele 1993; Said 1978; Woods 1998). Katherine McKittrick (2006) notes, “hierarchies are naturalized by repetitively spatializing difference” (xv), suggesting which bodies belong and which bodies are out of place. Yet, as she illustrates through engaging Black feminist geographic practice, “poetics of landscape” (Glissant 1989) can forge alternative real and imagined geographies that “put demands on traditional geographic arrangements because they expose the racial-sexual functions of the production of space and establish new ways to read (and perhaps live) geography” (McKittrick 2006, 143). These poetics of landscape are evident in the movements of the young walkers we will encounter in the next part of this dissertation as they traverse urban spaces deliberately organized to avert pedestrian activity, revealing that “the long poem of
walking manipulates spatial organizations, no matter how panoptic they may be” (de Certeau 1984, 101).

Recent proliferation of scholarship under the banner of Black Geographies adds critical depth to the spatial turn by attending to insurgent spatial knowledges, negotiations, and practices that undermine racialized geographies (Hawthorne 2019; McKittrick and Woods 2007; Reese 2019; Shabazz 2015; Summers 2019). Capitalism’s tendency toward racialized differentiation is a global phenomenon (Robinson 2020) that ubiquitously takes spatial form. Transgressive negotiations of space in Cape Town illustrate that the Black geographic turn can be deepened by greater engagement with how particular racial formations “take place” and are undermined in historical-geographic contexts beyond the Americas (Chari 2015; Hawthorne 2019). Black geographic perspectives on South Africa in particular must be foregrounded given the centrality of spatial matters to the country’s historical and contemporary milieu and the potential for South African contexts to reveal wider global trends in how sociospatial processes (like education) are entangled with the (re)production or contestation of hierarchized racial difference.

Though the spatial turn has been reinvigorated by scholarship attentive to racialized geographies and creative practices that resist them, its implications for critical studies of education and the potential for educational studies to generate sociospatial theory remain fertile ground. A robust yet diffuse multidisciplinary scholarship on the spatial politics of schooling has prompted a growing call for critical geographies of education (Nguyen, Cohen, and Huff 2017; Hunter 2020). Schooling across contexts has operated as a racial and spatial project, variously advancing agendas of segregation and assimilation. Yet schools also function as staging grounds for forging alternative spatial imaginaries, mobilizing spatial tactics of transformative
citizenship, and disentangling the links between race, place, and power in ways that forge new patterns of relation. While geographers have studied schooling in relation to spatial processes like gentrification and migration (Nguyen, Cohen, and Huff 2017) and educationalists have drawn on spatial analysis to explore design and use of schools, classrooms, and other sites deemed educational (Lim, O’Halloran, and Podlasov 2012; Gruenewald 2003), it is rarer that the potential of education (in school and beyond) to contribute to broader sociospatial debates and theory generation is centered. Moreover, the pedagogical dimensions of space itself are ripe for exploration. How do spatial practice and spatial imaginaries inculcate or undermine geographic arrangements of power? What is learned through normative or transgressive processes of navigating divided landscapes? How are aspirations and imagined futures shaped by spatial arrangements? The concept of “spatial pedagogy” that I develop through exploring Launch experiences and perspectives on space, location, and mobility in a postapartheid city can extend critical geographies of education by exploring these questions and more.

The growing literature on critical geographies of education has itself been geographically limited and can be deepened through engagement with sociospatial dimensions of educational processes beyond North America and the UK (Hunter 2020). School spaces were central to the spatial ordering of difference and disciplining of aspirations in the context of apartheid South Africa (Karlsson 2004), yet they also produced some of its most sustained and fierce resistance, particularly in the 1976 Soweto uprisings that ignited youth across the country and marked a major turning point in antiapartheid struggles (Hirson 1979; Hyslop 1999; Mafeje 1978). Before the National Party introduced Bantu Education in 1953 (and, in 1963 and 1965, separate education for those classified as Coloured and Indian), Africans students were subjected to
segregated “Native Education” that involved lower funding and poor facilities. However, curricula were not as strictly differentiated and, although mission education often pushed a racist “civilizing” agenda, many who attended mission schools nonetheless forged a critical consciousness through these contradictory experiences, and some of these mission school students emerged as South Africa's fiercest anticolonial and antiapartheid leaders (Comaroff 1996). This shifted when Bantu Education transferred control of education from provinces to the national government, established differentiated curricula along constructed racial and ethnolinguistic classifications, and forced religious schools to operate under government supervision or close. It introduced a more explicit pedagogy of domination (Nkomo 1990) to inculcate a broader geography of domination.

As evidenced by the spatial terms consistently deployed by Hendrik Verwoerd—Minister of Native Affairs, Bantu Education architect, and later Prime Minister—apartheid’s pedagogy of domination was also a spatial pedagogy, intended to shape appropriate aspirations and instill a spatial ordering of reified difference. “Education must train and teach people...according to the sphere in which they live” (Tabata 1960, emphasis mine). Speaking to the Senate in June 1954, Verwoerd elaborated on the alliance between pedagogies and geographies of domination. “There is no place for him in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour...Until now he has been subject to a school system which drew him away from his own community and misled him by showing him the green pastures of European society in which he is not allowed to graze” (Tabata 1960, 54, emphasis mine). These spatial terms are not merely metaphors; schooling played a formative role in constructing apartheid by bolstering the physical partitioning of South Africa. With the removal of Black residents from areas declared ‘White’ by
the 1950 Group Areas Act, schooling geography in the apartheid city was redrawn as it stretched outward spatially along racial lines (Hunter 2019; Karlsson 2007). As a result, reconstruction of schooling since the 1994 democratic transition has been as much a spatial as a structural challenge (Lemon and Stevens 1999; Lemon and Battersby-Lennard 2009).

The protracted political transition from apartheid unfolded in ways that protected the interests of historically White schools and accelerated market relations in education, resulting in the continued unequal structuring of schooling along racial and spatial lines despite the advent of a nonracial democracy (Christie 1995; Tikly and Mabogoane 1997; Hunter 2019). The issues of location, mobility, and infrastructure have been key to this process. A complex approach to school reform coupled desegregation with devolution and privatization in ways that maintained apartheid geography and allowed historically White schools to preserve privilege (Christie 1995). Anticipating the moment of political transition in the early 1990s, the National Party government legally transferred the title deeds of the signature picturesque buildings and grounds of formerly White “Model C” public schools to their management councils free of charge (Christie 1995; Tikly and Mabogoane 1997). These backroom dealings illustrate the “resourcefulness of the apartheid state in securing patterns of privilege at a time of political transition,” what a bureaucrat at the time called “giving away the family silver” (Christie 1995, 53, 54). The vast discrepancies between facilities along race and class lines in South Africa’s tiered and increasingly marketized schooling system remains a touchpoint in education debates. Public former Model C schools and elite private schools are equipped with libraries, sports grounds, science and computer laboratories, well manicured foliage, and sometimes multiple pools. These coveted facilities also allow them to generate additional funds by renting their
spaces for elite social events, bolstering the already immense funding gap of private contributions from parent fees and donations. Meanwhile “previously disadvantaged” no-fee government schools in townships and rural areas often lack basics like toilets and sanitation. In several high profile incidents, primary school children drowned in pit toilets or died when school infrastructure collapsed on them (Fihlani 2018; Hazvineyi 2019). Educational activism at the basic education level in South Africa, primarily driven by youth organizing group Equal Education, has strategically taken aim at infrastructure as a core campaign focus, highlighting how the material inequity of facilities not only causes physical hazards, but also shapes unequal teaching and learning experiences through issues like overcrowding, a major problem in township schools (Brockman 2016). On the other hand, the sector of “affordable” private schools that has ballooned since the democratic transition varies greatly in terms of fees and facilities (Languille 2016). Corporate school chains like Curro and ADvTECH that serve middle class families have constructed attractive, well-equipped campuses within postapartheid market-led urban development projects like Cape Town’s Century City, whereas low-fee private schools that cater to lower middle class, working, and some poor families operate out of “old industrial buildings, office blocks and houses in the inner city and townships” (Ramulongo 2020).

Beyond infrastructure, the issue of location and mobility has taken on new resonance in postapartheid schooling. A school being perceived as “good” is as much determined by its location and the makeup of its student body as its exams scores, and indeed these criteria are all entangled, given the legacies of apartheid “separate development” policies in education. The greater choice enabled by the 1996 South African Schools Act’s softening of school zones, meant to redress the exclusion of apartheid’s “group areas,” has resulted in masses of Black children
traveling long distances daily to access “good” schools outside of their neighborhoods (de Kadt et al 2019; Posel and Graspa 2017), which are labeled as such according to hierarchies that still mirror former racial classifications. This movement to access schooling has formed new types of subjectivity, as young people with the means daily traverse the stark borders of still divided cities (Fataar 2015; Ndlovu 2020). Yet the ability to access “choice” is unequally distributed, given school fees and transportation costs. Because “apartheid segregation subsequently became the terrain on which a marketised system developed” (Hunter 2019, 22), uneven geography continues to shape schooling overall.

Launch, as a no-fee turned low-fee school that has operated in “White,” “Black,” and “grey” areas of Cape Town out of repurposed warehouse, business, and school buildings, all while serving students of Langa township, does not fit neatly into this complex schooling terrain, but, in its misfit nature, offers insights about how all of these categories operate in South Africa. Additionally, youth, educators, and families at Launch and beyond navigate this landscape creatively toward a variety of ends, illustrating the spatial dimensions of aspiration and the pedagogical power of transgressive movement across unequal social space. I propose that both the movements of the school and the movements of the people illustrate a “spatial pedagogy,” or the educative capacity of spatial practices to elucidate, entrench, or disrupt established social geography and patterns of movement. Spatial pedagogy is a key pedagogy of aspiration employed at Launch to propel Black youth beyond the borders of apartheid geography.

1.4 Breathing Toward Desired Futures: Trauma Informed Pedagogy of Aspiration

Now that I have fully explored “space,” I return to my definition of aspiration as “a capacity to navigate social space toward desired futures” and linger on the notion of “desire.”
This points to the necessity of unpacking the affective dimensions of aspiration. But, rather than interrogate desire, I will take an unexpected turn and follow Launch’s lead to the question, what obstructs navigation toward desired futures? This brings me to “trauma,” a core concept that anchors the school’s pedagogy of aspiration.

Launch’s manual declares that “the most obviously distinguishing aspect” of the school and its “chief means to our identified end goal of self-empowerment” is a unique trauma-informed approach to the compulsory South African national curriculum of Life Orientation. The key distinctions of their approach are a focus on “breath,” through guided breathing and other mindfulness exercises, and “voice,” through daily processing groups called LO circles modeled on dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT)\(^\text{16}\) where students and teachers “work through their experiences.” These practices are framed as both trauma interventions and means of inculcating aspiration through “building students’ awareness of possibility” (Launch Manual).

Trauma is often understood by educators as a barrier to aspiration, both because of its constricting force in the present and its ability to compromise futures. Though pedagogical approaches variously identified as “trauma-informed,” “trauma-sensitive,” and “trauma-responsive” have taken on new urgency due to the loss and suffering of the COVID19 pandemic (Berger and Martin 2020; Burke Harris 2021; Camera 2021; Yassim and Pilane 2021), attention to trauma’s pervasiveness and deleterious effects has been on the rise for decades in care-oriented fields like health services, social work, and education (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment 2014). Moving from an assumption that people are more likely than not to have

\(^{16}\) I elaborate in Chapter 3 on DBT and the history of how Launch came to incorporate clinical therapy techniques into their curricular model. For now, it suffices to say that DBT is a group therapy approach originated by American psychologist Marsha Linehan in her work with people managing suicidal ideation and self-harm (Linehan 1987).
histories of trauma, schools that adopt these approaches advocate a shift away from punitive responses to aggression, withdrawal, or self-harm and toward a restorative focus on helping youth process and recover from experiences that trigger such behaviors (Pappano 2014).

While contemporary advocacy of trauma-informed approaches in education often takes a universalizing tone, Black scholars writing in and against racial capitalist systems of colonialism and apartheid paid particular attention to the psychic impacts of these systems’ endemic violences on racially marginalized peoples and warned of their detrimental effects for posterity (Fanon 2004; Mangyani 2019). Drawing from experiences treating psychiatric patients during anticolonial war and his travels through Africa with the national liberation front (Pithouse 2012), Frantz Fanon (2004) predicted, “for many years to come we shall be bandaging the countless and sometimes indelible wounds inflicted on our people by the colonialist onslaught” (181). He described racist colonial violence as making it “impossible…to breathe, in more than one sense of the word” (Fanon 2008, 201). Circulating Fanon’s words among comrades in South Africa, antiapartheid activist Steve Biko (2002) highlighted these psychic wounds, concluding that “the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed” (68). Biko’s assessment also borrowed from Paulo Freire (Naidoo 2015), who drew on Fanon to posit that “internalization” of colonial violence can lead to “necrophilic behavior: the destruction of life—their own or that of their oppressed fellows,” and argued that liberatory pedagogy must foreground critical dialogue and action that enables people to unveil and intervene on oppressive conditions that shape behavior (Freire 2017, 37–39).

Originally used to denote an observable physical injury, the concept of trauma as a psychic wound has evolved in Western medicine through Freud’s psychoanalytic focus on
unconscious memory repression and recovery, the centrality of war neuroses like shell shock in the development of trauma theory, post-WWII political shifts in recognition of collective trauma as a result of the Holocaust, the addition of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) in 1980, and recent neuroscientific findings that increasingly link mental disorders to chemical transformations in the brain (Hinton and Good 2016; Morris 2008). Despite the growing international dominance of American psychiatry and psychology and their medical model of trauma, questions remain about how trauma is conceptualized, both on grounds of cross-cultural validity and on political grounds, the latter being of key relevance for this dissertation. Discussing the central role of PTSD in human rights claims in the wake of catastrophe, Rosalind Morris (2008) argues that the “inherent focus on traumatic events in its diagnosis (which requires that the symptoms...be linked to an originating event) often displaces concern for the structural sources of long-term social and psychic suffering, including that caused by homelessness, poverty, unemployment, or long-term political oppression” (441, emphasis mine).

Christina Sharpe’s In the Wake: On Blackness and Being (2016) echoes this challenge to trauma’s political and temporal construction, specifically troubling how we take up trauma and memory in relation to anti-Blackness by asking “how does one mourn the interminable event? how does one… ‘come to terms with’ (which usually means move past) ongoing and quotidian atrocity?” (19–20). While South African scholars and activists have variously embraced and critiqued contemporary Afropessimist conceptions of a totalizing global anti-Blackness largely theorized from particular histories of enslavement in the Americas (Chigumadzi 2021; gamEdze and gamedZe 2019), these questions about the temporality of wounds inflicted by racialized
violence, and the (im)possibility of healing from a past that refuses to pass, have long been prevalent in South African discourse. Ramadan Suleman and Bhekizizwe Peterson’s acclaimed 2004 film *Zulu Love Letter*, which uses flashback and nonlinear narrative to portray the “recalcitrant presence of the past” (Adebayo 2021), captures this poignantly in one character’s lamentation on the impossibility of living in “a permanent wake” (Peterson and Suleman 2009). Describing the long arm of racial capitalist violence in South Africa in his poem “No Serenity Here,” Keorapetse Kgositsile (2017) writes, “the road to the mines/ like the road to any war/ is long and littered with casualties/ even those who still walk and talk/...there is nothing left after wars, only other wars” (125).

Many understand the afterlives spawned by colonialism and apartheid through a lens of intergenerational spectrality (Peterson 2019), but some call for a shift from framing trauma as a haunting, to approaching it as a harbinger. Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission psychologist who recounts eliciting testimony of state-sanctioned murders from an apartheid police officer in *A Human Being Died That Night* (2003), has argued that characterizing young Black South Africans’ experiences of trauma as “postmemory” (Hirsch 2012) transmitted from elders’ firsthand experiences “denies the enduring structural reality faced by the younger generations in countries with centuries of violent histories of colonial oppression” (Gobodo-Madikizela 2021, emphasis mine). Postapartheid persistence of both mundane and spectacular violences associated with racial capitalism, perhaps most exemplified in the Marikana massacre, suggests that trauma is not solely an imprint of past violences, but also their continuity. Through focus on the specter of Cecil John Rhodes, students in the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements have also contributed to “creating a vocabulary
for the trauma of being stranded in the present by marking the debris of empire through its founding colonial figures” (Mkhize 2019). Gobodo-Madikizela (2021) proposes that a future-inclusive conception of trauma can galvanize more urgent intervention on ongoing structural violence that threatens to reproduce it in perpetuity. “Trauma’s return is a more ambiguous space that points backwards, not just to a single traumatic event. It points to multiple generational pasts and forwards in a prophetic foretelling of traumatic violence to recur in the future...not only is the past not passed, it is the future that looms on the horizon”.

The move to complicate the temporal structure of trauma extends beyond the academic. Health researchers and practitioners working in clinical settings in South Africa and other contexts characterized by pervasive violence are increasingly stretching their lens from “post” traumatic stress to include a focus on “continuous” traumatic stress: stress caused by ongoing threats, in circumstances that are both inescapable and lacking in social protections due to constraining conditions of poverty and political circumstances (Eagle and Kaminer 2013; Nuttman-Shwartz and Shoval-Zuckerman 2016). Researchers have looked to mindfulness practices of meditative focus on present sensations, emotions, thoughts, and breath as uniquely suited to alleviate potential mental and physical health consequences of navigating continuous traumatic stress (Pillay and Eagle 2021). While some decry positive psychology’s cooptation and commodification of a “McMindfulness” that extracts practices from Buddhist spirituality divorced from political transformation (Purser 2019), and others call for greater sensitivity in mainstream mental health provision to widespread reliance on therapeutic healing approaches indigenous to South Africa (Bodibe 1993; van der Watt et al 2020), researchers nevertheless argue that mindfulness can be an important intervention in settings where continuous traumatic
stress coincides with limited or unequal access to health resources, given evidence that it can produce “immediate therapeutic and long term prophylactic gain” (Pillay and Eagle 2021). In under-resourced contexts where clinics are often staffed by auxiliary mental health workers, this intervention can be delivered by people who are not licensed psychologists or therapists, such as teachers and community leaders.

These debates have direct consequences for how and to what effect trauma-informed approaches are adopted in schools. The growing emphasis on trauma-informed pedagogy in US schools is typically traced to the 1998 publication of results from a 1995–1997 study of over seventeen thousand participants, conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Kaiser Permanente, that showed a correlation between adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and future physical and mental health complications (Felitti et al 1998). These findings sparked a proliferation of research on the neurobiological effects of toxic stress, the severe or sustained activation of the body’s stress response. In education, they contributed to increased focus on social emotional learning, school-based trainings on the impacts of trauma and how to accommodate students who have experienced it, and to state laws and federal funding that endorse trauma-attentive frameworks in schools (Brown-Nagin 2018). The CDC-Kaiser study and the research it catalyzed have also had global impacts in health and education, as international entities like the World Health Organization have pushed to develop research instruments to gain global lenses on the prevalence of ACEs, especially in conflict and disaster settings (Anda et al 2010).

While trauma-responsive education approaches in the US emerged from a medical model of investigating trauma’s impact on the body, in South Africa they can be tied to a transition-era
discourse on the impact of collective trauma on the body politic. A “wounded society” narrative was linked to the globally resonant processes of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which unfolded at the same time as the CDC-Kaiser ACEs study, and eventually had impacts on the classroom and curriculum as well. The Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act of 1995 authorized the TRC to promote forgiveness among apartheid victims and perpetrators through disclosure of truth, often in exchange for amnesty. Intended to be a “societal level trauma intervention” (Kaminer and Eagle 2010, 120), the TRC’s most famous feature of nationally televised public hearings was based on psychotherapeutic and Christian notions of the healing power of “catharsis and expiation” (Posel 2008, 131). The “underlying premise and purpose of the TRC’s public hearings was prominently displayed...in the posters that decked the walls of the venues for the hearings: ‘Healing is speaking’” (Posel 2008, 138).

“Healing,” a guiding principle of both the TRC and the Constitution—expressed in the preamble’s aim to “heal the divisions of the past”—also became a curricular mandate for a new South Africa, cited in both the National Curriculum Statement and Launch’s mission statement. Given the central role of education in apartheid’s racist project of “separate development,” curricular transformation was seen as an essential component of healing. This mandate was most exemplified in Life Orientation (LO), a compulsory subject introduced in 1997 for grades R-9 and extended to grades 10-12 in 2011 with the updated Curriculum Assessment and Policy

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17 Grades R (reception year) through 9, referred to as the General Education and Training phase, are compulsory.
According to the Department of Basic Education (2011), Life Orientation is “the study of the self in relation to others and to society.” It was conceived as a combination of personal and social development, civics and human rights awareness, health and physical education, and career readiness. In *Curriculum 2005*, the first National Curriculum Statement released in 1997 (revised in 2002 and 2011), the Department of Education stated that, among other things, LO would enable learners to:

1. Understand and accept themselves as unique and worthwhile human beings
2. Use skills and display attitudes and values that improve relationships in family, group and community
3. Respect the rights of people to hold personal beliefs and values
4. Demonstrate value and respect for human rights as reflected in Ubuntu and other similar philosophies
5. Practice acquired life and decision-making skills

Developing a healthy sense of “self-in-society” in a context where racism, inequality, patriarchy, and violence remain inherent to the country’s structures despite the transition to a constitutional democracy is a formidable task for teachers and students. Many argue the DoE has not provided adequate professional development to prepare teachers for the complexity of this

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18 LO’s post-transition introduction paradoxically coincided with a downgrading of history education and an amalgamation of the subject into human and social sciences for grades R-9. The Further Education and Training (FET) phase—which refers to the non compulsory Grades 10-12—includes history, but as an elective, not offered at all schools. June Bam (2000) has argued that long term curriculum planning was sacrificed for political expediency, and trade-offs made in the transition “[put] the process of collective amnesia into place.” The marginalization of history in a new outcomes-focused, market-driven curriculum focused on preparing youth for a global economy represented a suppression of historical consciousness in favor of technocratic consciousness, and emphasized moving on from the past into a “new” South Africa. While history was previously a prominent subject in SA curriculum, it was largely a colonial history emphasizing events in Europe, triumph of White settlers over “uncivilized” Africans, and Christian nationalism. Alternative people’s histories were central to anticolonial and antiapartheid struggles including in the Black Consciousness and People’s Education movements. Their tradition of centering questions of conflict was downplayed in the new curriculum (Bam 2000; Kallaway 1995; Robinson 2018).

19 Ubuntu is a term/concept in Nguni languages which roughly translates to “human-ness.” In isiXhosa, it is often expressed as, “Umntu ngumuntu ngabantu,” “a person is a person through people.” South African philosopher Mogobe Ramose (2003) explains, “Although the English language does not exhaust the meaning of this maxim or aphorism, it may nonetheless be construed to mean that to be a human being is to affirm one’s humanity by recognizing the humanity of others and, on that basis, establish humane relations with them” (272).
work, particularly with learners contending with poverty and its attendant perils. While some maintain that LO can play a vital role in helping South African youth navigate and mitigate multiple manifestations of violence (Lamb and Snodgrass 2017), a large body of research shows it is not consistently implemented or taken seriously across the nation (DePalma and Francis 2014; Jacobs 2011; Matshoba and Rooth 2014; Prinsloo 2007). This was corroborated by my discussions with teachers and students from Launch and other schools, as well as my visits to schools where, at best, LO was taught once or twice a week, driven by the textbook, and, at worst, it was used as a free or flex period. The subject is tested on the National Senior Certificate exam, but results are not weighed for tertiary admission, lending to its low status. Additionally, while advocates of trauma-informed pedagogy position schools as sites of intervention and sanctuary in settings of pervasive violence, they often overlook the reality of schools as sites of trauma across time and space. This is certainly true in the South African case where school spaces were “harnessed to the political project of apartheid” (Karlsson 2004, 327) and where significant numbers of youth continue to experience violence at school—whether at the hands of teachers, who routinely rely on corporal punishment despite its 1996 banning, or at the hands of other students, which has driven support for “school resource officer” posts modeled after policing in US public schools (Western Cape Government 2013), despite research that shows the additional violence of this approach (Merkwae 2015). In this context, teachers and students frequently presented Launch as an “intervention high school” helping students heal from trauma to clear the path to elevated aspirations, and a counter-narrative and potential model for improving the quality of Life Orientation instruction.
Similar to trauma, the temporal and political construction of aspiration is multivalent. Derived from the Latin spirare (“breathe”) adjoined with the prefix ad (“to/toward”, in time or space), to “aspire” is to direct one’s breath or life force toward an end or desire. Educational anthropologist Leya Mathew (2018) describes it as a “practice of ethics’ that makes the deprivations of the past and the precarity of the present profoundly meaningful” and argues that aspiration “is not only future oriented but also backward looking because imagined futures are built on pasts that have to be eliminated, and memories become a map for shaping the future” (72, 75). Scholarship on the politics of aspiration has proliferated in the anthropology and sociology of youth and education amidst the increasing precarity of market economies that have intensified education as the morally legitimized site generating social reproduction and mobility (Desai 2020, Fataar 2010; Jansen 2020; Mathew and Lukose 2020; Stambach and Hall 2017). Much of this work draws on Arjun Appadurai’s (2013) concept of the “capacity to aspire,” an unevenly distributed resource amidst vastly unequal conditions of possibility. His claim that the “relatively rich and powerful invariably have a more fully developed capacity to aspire” is, importantly, not about imaginative capacity, but the ways present conditions shape people’s relationships to futures (188): “I am not saying that the poor cannot wish, want, need, plan, or aspire. But part of poverty is a diminishing of the circumstances in which these practices occur” (189). Like Launch, Appadurai links “the faculty of voice” and “the capacity to aspire,” arguing “each accelerates the nurture of the other” (189). Yet, he qualifies that the potential for a voice to be heard and heeded in ways that yield a more just distribution of resources depends on the terms of recognition, which are best influenced by collective voice and action.
In lieu of redistributive or reparative states, schools serving youth in poverty increasingly foreground “pedagogies of aspiration” characterized by lessons in individual empowerment and enterprise, often framed in justice-oriented terms. These lessons emphasize the affective and aesthetic labor of self-fashioning through emotion management and self-presentation (Mathew and Lukose 2020). Writing on education in liberalizing India, Mathew and Lukose (2020) argue, What empowerment pedagogy attempts is a recalibration of the individual self and its interiority as the pre-eminent resource for social mobility. Unlike caste privilege or land ownership, the self is a universally available resource. The formal teaching of aspiration thus perversely presents desirable middle-class trajectories to non-elite learners without equipping them in the…resource mobilisations necessary to pursue these. (700)

Turning to Black youth across the diaspora, Christina Sharpe (2016) lingers on this “perversity” in a different register, arguing that aspiration, and the marshaling of regulation and resilience it demands, can be both “violent and life-saving” (113). Living the continued traumatic “time and effects” of forced migrations, enslavement, imperialisms/colonialisms, apartheid, structural adjustments, and more, makes aspiration a perilous endeavor of eking out presents, let alone futures (15). Less concerned with its conventional use tied to opportunity, Sharpe maintains that even aspiration as breath work, the keeping of breath in the Black body, produces strain for Black people in atmospheres of anti-Blackness where they are not intended to breathe freely (108). Koleka Putuma takes up this strain of breath work in South Africa’s anti-Black atmosphere in Collective Amnesia (2017), a poetic meditation on trauma in three parts: “Inherited Memory,” “Buried Memory.” and “Postmemory.” As one review eloquently describes, Putuma gestures to the task of her generation: “sitting in generational pain, and remedying it” by embracing “breathing, speaking, and being (also understood as taking space unapologetically), as political acts” (Phalafala 2017, 253). Yet the poem “Suicide” consists of only a footnote: “Not
everyone can afford to breathe for a living” (Putuma 2017, 73). “Afford” suggests not all can
marshal the resources, in this case the resilience so centered in trauma-informed pedagogies, to
manage the strain of “aspiring” toward valorized outcomes in a postapartheid context where they
still cannot simply breathe.

Putuma is part of a so-called “born-free” generation that has cohered around a central
assertion: healing is impossible without justice, without addressing the persisting conditions of
racial capitalism. “Born unfrees” (Mabasa 2020) have forced a reckoning with the reconciliatory
terms of a democratic transition based on a liberal mythology of “rainbow nationalism” that
associates racism with evil deeds of an apartheid white supremacist state, excluding it from the
longer arc of colonialism and divorcing it from the enduring racial capitalist political economy
and (neo)liberal order that continue to perpetuate trauma in the present (Gibson 2017; Gillespie
and Naidoo 2019a; Mabasa 2020; Modisane, Collis-Buthelezi, and Ouma 2017). The TRC was a
key architect of rainbowism. While conceptualized as a “healing” process of disclosure, aimed at
shifting from retributive to restorative justice, some argue that this leap stopped short of the
reparative (Marchese 2020). Questions that challenged the political legitimacy of the TRC even
as it unfolded have been thrown into stark relief. Its narrow focus on violations of “bodily
integrity” portrayed racism as solely willed violence and declined to stage an interrogation of
why such violations occurred—capitalist accumulation (Mamdani 2002). In doing so, it
exceptionalized racism as gross acts committed by and against individuals, rather than anchoring
it in the broader violations of apartheid racial capitalism, which were simultaneously political and
economic, particularly systemic group oppressions like mandatory racial categorization, forced
removals, pass laws and influx control, and migrant labor (Mamdani 2002, 2015; Posel 1999).
Mahmood Mamdani (2015) argues that, under apartheid, the vast majority of the population experienced violence not as individual violations of bodily integrity but as group coercions that targeted the “means of livelihood, land, and labor” of those categorized as “Bantu” (73). While transition processes were portrayed as open dialogues forging a new South Africa, they effectively foreclosed the possibility of social justice, which lies beyond a liberal order invested in obscuring its foundations in this coercion. Instead, the transition forwarded a “neoliberal understanding of justice, one that individualized it” (Mamdani 2015, 78). This was driven by depoliticized notions of violence and trauma that “disabled the link between subject and object, agent and structure” (Posel 1999, 28), ultimately limiting the ability of the TRC and transition processes to prevent reproduction of similar traumas in a democratic dispensation.

Through exploring Life Orientation at Launch, I will illuminate how contemporary trauma-informed pedagogies of aspiration in South Africa and beyond also risk depoliticizing trauma, by approaching it as individualized, event-based, and rooted in household, family, or community, while divorcing it from the larger structures of poverty and racism that generate and reproduce it.

### 1.5 A Portable, Uncontestable Logic: Aspiration as Crisis Response

I have thoroughly outlined the concepts of aspiration at play in this dissertation, so it now becomes necessary to ask, what is aspiration doing? To answer this, I zoom out from Cape Town and South Africa to consider how Launch schools are nested in larger, transnational projects and discourses of accelerating market reform in education. This nested position is signaled vividly by Launch’s controversial, short-lived involvement in Western Cape provincial lawmakers’ efforts to import US/UK charter and academy school models to South Africa. Aspiration presents itself as handy to the global mobility of market reforms by diverting attention away from structural
sources of racialized inequity and from education as a potential avenue of struggle against them, toward the individualized striving (or “failure” to do so) of students, teachers, and families.

Market-based education reform across global contexts is largely premised on the notion that education is in “crisis.” In their call for greater attention to race and racism in international education development work and in the scholarly field of comparative and international education (CIE), Arathi Sriprakash, Leon Tikly, and Sharon Walker (2019) interrogate what this crisis framing renders visible and invisible and the responses it legitimizes and obscures.

The discourse of “crisis” can present itself as uncontestable: of course, one cannot argue against learning in schools. However, the discourse obfuscates its own politics – how the “crisis” came to be and what sorts of concepts of and responses to learning it renders intelligible and possible…[W]e note the production of silence…that denies racism as a matter of relevance to the “global learning crisis”. We go as far as to suggest that this production of silence is indicative that the “crisis” operates as a racial project, since by eliding race, racism is normalised.” (683).

By obscuring complex and varying histories of racialization that have produced the status quo across contexts, the “crisis” narrative operates as a racial project (Omi and Winant 2015) that normalizes racism and obscures responses that might address its persistence, even as it invites a framing of market-based responses as equity driven, antiracist interventions. In side-stepping how past and present capital accumulation based on racialized domination produces educational inequity across the globe, the discourse of crisis makes way for increased flow of market-based, techno-managerial approaches—performance metrics, assessment tools, public-private partnerships, training and consultancy businesses, etc (Sriprakash, Tikly, and Walker 2019). Increasingly, the crisis narrative also makes way for educational projects rooted in pedagogies of aspiration that encourage the affective and aesthetic labor of self-fashioning and self-improvement as the most effective, appropriate way to manage the anxieties and precarities of
extreme racialized inequality. These projects focus students, educators, and families on “soft skills” like choice, agency, enterprise, emotion management, and the marshaling of individual interiority as the chief resources for aspiring to futures beyond crisis (Mathew and Lukose 2020). Pedagogies of aspiration often amount to “the benevolent rationalizing of liberal orders” (Melamed 2011) and obstruct analyses of the structural conditions of racism.

Policy borrowing scholarship, a CIE subfield premised on researching “why, when, how, and to what effect” (Steiner-Khamsi 2021, 328) “best practices” are transferred, has thus far obscured our view of how global racisms shape policy circulations. Although policy borrowing scholars have engaged critical discussions on the origins of educational policy transfer, for example, acknowledging its roots in imperial networks (Steiner-Khamsi and Quist 2000) and detailing its coercive nature in the context of structural adjustment (Phillips and Ochs 2004), the racialized nature of these historical arrangements and how their afterlives continue to shape policy networks and flows is under-explored. Policy borrowing research examines governance, politics of knowledge, and economic dimensions of neoliberal globalization to understand how a “global education industry” is transforming governance and undermining democratic processes across contexts (Ball 2012; Verger 2012; Verger, Lubienski, and Steiner-Khamsi 2016), resulting in education systems that are “beholden more to shareholders than local stakeholders” (Hook 2018, 300) and shaped by policies “flowing and converging to produce a singular vision of best practice based on the methods and tenets of the neo-liberal imaginary” (Ball 2012). Yet the subfield rarely explicitly examines the ways these phenomena are racialized.

While capitalist dynamics of neoliberal marketization shape how pedagogies of aspiration circulate transnationally, scholars must attend to how these flows are fundamentally shaped by
global racisms, particularly in their entanglement with longstanding and still circulating racialized discourses of “discipline”, character formation, and political passivity as forms of uplift (Bates 2019; Webster 2020). These examinations are necessary to understand how market reform and its strategic leveraging of benevolent discourses like aspiration influence contemporary schooling for racially marginalized youth across contexts. This is particularly urgent in South Africa, where the colonial and apartheid notions of “separate development” that birthed the current education “crisis” were themselves once benevolently framed, borrowed policy discourses, modeled off accommodationist “adaptive education” for Black students in the US South (Chisholm 2002; Magaziner 2016). Ample scholarship has illustrated how, historically, the perceived portability of racist education policies has been brokered by transnational networks of elite actors, including missionaries, philanthropists, academics, and policymakers (Campbell 1998; Kallaway and Swartz 2016; King 1971; Lewis 1962; McLeod and Paisley 2016; Scott 2009; Watkins 2001). Some even argue that the borrowing of educational policies has played a central role in the global production of race itself (Bates 2019).

The late 19th and early 20th century global circulation of the Hampton model of industrial education provides a useful example. Originating from Samuel Chapman Armstrong’s missionary work in Hawaii, further developed in application to African American education in the US South through the Hampton and Tuskegee Institutes, later applied to Native American education at US boarding schools, and then exported to West Africa and South Africa (Baker 2006; Bates 2019; Zimmerman 2010), industrial education was a traveling pedagogy framed as a liberal project of racial uplift, despite being deeply accommodationist to the unjust political-economic status quo and contested in communities in which it was applied. In the absence of
scarcity of state support for Black education, White philanthropists were able to set education policy agendas and determine “what works” despite significant Black dissent (Anderson 1988). Contemporary policy borrowing must be understood within this history, as racist policies continue to travel through liberal uplift discourses that promote deficit-oriented “best practices” for marginalized youth. Mahasan Offutt-Chaney’s (2019) research is a notable exception offering a lens on the racial politics of contemporary policy borrowing. She explores how the diffusion of US market reforms through global “Black Souths” resembles the early 20th century spread of industrial education, and reproduces its logics of anti-Black coloniality, focusing on the case of how the complete chartering of post-Katrina New Orleans schools provided a vision for privatizing Liberia’s school system (Offutt-Chaney 2019). In my exploration of how Launch and its pedagogies of aspiration are situated in market reform policy networks at multiple scales, I expand this pressing inquiry into how contemporary racisms shape the transnational flow and local unfolding of education discourse, policy, and practice.

In this chapter, I provided an overview of how racial capitalism has shaped South African schooling and how it has carved the social terrain of Cape Town. I then outlined the core concept of aspiration at play in this dissertation, emphasizing its spatial and affective dimensions and interrogating how the notion of aspiration functions at local and transnational scales. This leads to the central questions of my dissertation, addressed in the following pages: What are people doing with aspiration? How do students, alumni, families, and staff of a low-fee private school navigate the politics of aspiration in an anti-Black city and marketized schooling landscape?
Interlude: The Commute

Riding the school bus from Langa to Pinelands feels like a proper excursion. When you board from your stop at the New Flats hostel, you settle into your window seat and let the sights drown out the gossip being shared next to you, the harmonizing voices of choir members near the back singing “Bathandwa besicela indlela/Sikhululeni sihambe/Kukude emakhaya,” and the driver commanding your classmates who are hopping from seat to seat to sit down. As the bus makes its way through Langa’s morning buzz, you gaze out and feel like you are heading to a different place. You are. At the next stop you see a rainbow of kids in uniforms of all colors waiting for transport or walking toward the taxi rank or the train to set out toward town and the southern suburbs. You notice others in clusters of identical uniforms strolling toward local schools at a more leisurely pace. You spot a granny, dressed for domestic work, on a mad dash toward the taxis, halt in her tracks to lovingly greet a friend even though she’s clearly running late. You overhear them laughing and asking about the family as the bus whizzes by. Rolling down Washington Street, you pass the old pass office and court, now a museum chronicling the unjust imprisonment or deportation that once awaited Black people caught without a pass due to laws that limited their access to the Western Cape. Outside the museum you see the mosaic honoring Xolile Mosi, a Langa student who was your same age when the police killed him on August 11, 1976 during uprisings against (mis)education. When the driver turns down Bhunga Avenue to one of Langa’s two strategically planned exits and merges onto the Settlers Way

20 Singing is a commonplace shared activity at school. Whether hymns, popular music, struggle songs, students can always be heard singing throughout the school day—on the bus, walking between classes, during lunch, to open community meetings, etc. This song “Indlela” (variously “road”, “way”, or “directions” in isiXhosa) can be translated to “Beloveds, let us be on our way. Permit us to be on our way. Home is far away.” In the context of embarking on the journey home from a gathering, it acknowledges and thanks hosts for their hospitality, announces the parting of ways, and requests blessings for the long travels home.
section of the gridlocked N2 highway toward town, you kick back as the bus queues in endless rows of taxis and passenger vehicles barely inching along to work and school. Although your school is at the very next offramp, you know it will be quite a while before the bus reaches it at the routine snail’s pace of N2 inbound traffic on a weekday morning. There is plenty of time for your friend to share igwinya, fill you in on the gossip, inform you of after school maths help for matrics, and remind you to meet by the tuck shop at lunch to find a shady spot outside.

When the bus finally creeps off the highway, the first thing you notice are the trees. They seem to somehow look lush no matter the time of year, but since it’s spring, they are a vibrant green that is both forest and dewy. Pinelands. There are no groves like this in the sandy plains of your neighborhood, but these areas were of course planned with distinct, but interrelated, intentions. In fact, the elders say Langa and Pinelands were once part of the very same tract. Yet here, in this carefully designed “garden city,” protected pines imported during the colonial days still line Forest Drive, creating an abiding light breeze, and guzzling water in a city now plagued by drought. You pass fortified white houses with brown thatched roofs and verdant gardens shaded by karees and acacias. Everything suddenly seems quieter, yet not necessarily peaceful, as indicated by the towering gates and electric fencing that surround the large residences, and the absence of human life on the street. Although you have traveled less than 2 km as the crow flies, you are in a different place, adjacent to, but not really “neighboring,” yours. The walk is in fact so reasonable from a distance standpoint, that several of your classmates miss the bus routinely or avoid bus fees altogether by opting for the 20 minute trek. Teachers reprimand them often

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21 Igwinya, also called vetkoek in Afrikaans or fatcake in English, is deep fried dough shaped like a bun. It’s a popular staple due to the fact that it’s affordable, portable, and typically available at spaza shops (informal stores) throughout the township.
since it involves treacherous traversing of highway or railway and walking through buffer zone land intentionally unpleasant to pedestrians.

This daily crossing between Langa and the “leafy suburbs” has been quite the education. Like the walkers, you have started to realize that its intricacy is a matter of layers of political decisions carved into the landscape, not the topography of the earth itself and definitely not the most sensible route to school. It would be hard to convince anyone otherwise, since the walkers usually arrive long before the bus. Due to the carefully planned roadway routes, and the great distance between jobs and workers that causes the daily overflow from the Cape Flats into town, the drive takes almost an hour on a good day. Ample time for you to start wrestling with new questions about the layout of your city, and your present and future place in it.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{22} Based on themes from conversations and interviews with students and alumni about commuting to school when it was located in Pinelands, a formerly White neighborhood that borders Langa, the township where Launch students live. Also based on fieldnotes from my experiences riding this bus to school with students on multiple occasions in 2014 when I lived for several weeks with a family that rented rooms in an older, middle class section of Langa.
Chapter 2: “Claiming Cape Town”: Spatial Pedagogy and the Politics of Aspiration

“We now know past any argument that places can have scars and they can be warm or cold or full of intrigue like faces.”
—Keorapetse Kgotsitsile, “In the Naming” (2017)

On January 17, 2018, I sat in a crowded lecture hall packed with teenagers. Their voices filled the space with anticipation and excitement, occasionally punctuated by moments of laughter and shouting as friends spotted each other despite embellishments of new haircuts, fresh braids, and spotless uniforms. The first day of school is filled with significance across contexts. As a teacher from the U.S., I recognized this familiar energy, but coupled with the arrival of a new calendar year, it seemed to take on a particular significance in this Cape Town high school. In her piece “Hand-Me-Downs,” Capetonian poet Koleka Putuma (2017) describes it as “January syndrome,” characterized by a desire to be made new each year, as if by some alchemic ability of schooling to transmute the very bodies of young people: “Everything had to be brand new: hair relaxed or shaved/ Vaseline so thick it could withstand any and all weather./ We were shiny and hopeful./ For what?/ We did not know./ From our hairline to our toenails, we were new…/ New marked us, shaped our behaviors and our postures” (14-15). Recounting the night before his first day at Launch and his family’s excitement that he was selected, one alumnus echoed these sentiments. “We didn’t want to sleep. We woke up in the morning excited, everything clean, everything new.”
The first day of school at Launch began as many that year would: with a community meeting led by a skit. While these gatherings are typically run by learners, staff took the lead on this day to set the tone. Student voices hushed and attention turned to the front as they noticed teachers dancing and loudly chanting across the lecture hall floor in the familiar style of the toyi-toyi. Several teachers began singing a protest song. After a few minutes, one teacher stopped, pumped his fist, and let out a loud call of “Amandla!” to which his colleagues on stage (as well as, instinctively, some learners) replied in unison “Ngawethu!” With this, they ended the skit, formed a line facing the learners, and summoned them to stand. One teacher asked for a volunteer to lead a song. Thembisa, a Grade 12 girl sitting at the top of the hall began to sing “Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika.” Learners quickly joined in. While I recognized parts of the song from South Africa’s national anthem, they notably sang from the original, extended isiXhosa hymn that morning, which served as an antiapartheid resistance anthem for the banned African National Congress and also as a pan-African liberation song adopted in the post-independence anthems of Zambia, Tanzania, Namibia and Zimbabwe. Following the song, learners sat as their teachers began to address them with opening thoughts for the year.

The first, Ms. Thabisa, was a Life Orientation teacher who grew up in Langa, graduated from Launch, and returned to teach after completing university and qualifying as a social worker. She made brief remarks contextualizing Launch’s history and philosophy, linking it to the toyi-toyi skit and asserting that the school exists to disrupt apartheid legacies of Bantu Education,

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23 The toyi-toyi is a protest dance that can commonly be seen at political demonstrations in South Africa.

24 “Power! It’s ours!” This is a common call and response dating back to liberation struggles.

25 “God Bless Africa”
which people as young as themselves fought and died to eradicate. The second teacher, Mrs. Christine, was an older woman who has taught at Launch since its 2004 founding. She trained in chemistry and metallurgy in preparation to work in the mining sector in the Democratic Republic of Congo before fleeing to South Africa amidst unrest. She initially made a living selling crafts in Cape Town’s Greenmarket Square and now works as a Physical Sciences teacher and an activist supporting recently arrived women refugees. Ms. Thabisa, who spoke previously, was one of her former students. On this first day of school, Mrs. Christine chose to accentuate the January syndrome and connect it to Launch’s mission by focusing her remarks on the theme of “conversion.” She directly addressed the newest members of the student body, the Grade 8s seated at the bottom of the hall. “The older learners will tell you that in math and science we learn about conversion. We learn how to convert between units of measurement right?” Older learners called out “Yeeees, miss.” “We learn how to convert centimeters to meters, meters to kilometers right?” “Yeeees, miss.” “Well here at Launch, we also learn about another type of conversion. We learn how to convert ourselves into the people we want to be. It’s hard work. You must practice.” She moved her eyes to address the entire student body. “Today, you should be thinking about, what am I trying to become? What conversion needs to happen in my life, my behavior, my attitude so I can achieve the future I want?”

Several teachers addressed the learners before they were dismissed to their first classes, emphasizing similar notes of newness and conversion. As we filed out of the lecture hall, I followed the Grade 8s, who were ushered not to classrooms but to the parking lot. There, two Launch alumni stood in front of a pair of chartered buses, offering learners stapled packets of handouts titled “Claiming Cape Town” as they boarded. The Grade 8s’ school year would begin,
not with classroom lessons about units of measurement or any other academic material, but with a tour of carefully selected sites throughout the city of Cape Town. As we rode the bus to various sites on the other side of the mountain and then back to the township, it struck me that the entire first day “at school” was spent outside the building. I would later learn that this act of “going to town,” as is colloquially said, was a central pedagogical component of the serious work of conversion that Mrs. Christine described. From strolling through the Company’s Garden, built by the Dutch East India Company as a refreshment station for colonial traders, to relaxing on wealthy beachfronts of the Camps Bay and Sea Point neighborhoods that were designated “White” under apartheid, to climbing Signal Hill for vistas of Table Mountain, Lion’s Head, Greenpoint Stadium, and Cape Town’s City Bowl, the excursion did not seem to take on any explicit instructional content. Yet in the provocative trip title, the locations selected, the initial call to conversion, and the annual recurring nature of this rite of passage partially planned and facilitated by past learners, an implicit lesson was palpable. Forging what Launch’s mission statement calls a “fulfilling future” requires learners to occupy and navigate the contested and fractured spaces of their city in ways that transgress deeply entrenched social divides and patterns of movement, as the trip title pointedly puts it, to “Claim Cape Town.”
2.1 Spatial Pedagogy and the Politics of Aspiration

Anthropologists of education have characterized schooling as a social project of making futures (Stambach and Hall 2017), a field where youth and families navigate aspirations, framed by their perceptions of what is possible within starkly unequal conditions of possibility. While aspiration is conventionally conceptualized in temporal terms as a striving toward futures, I argue it is also a spatial imaginary projecting youth into contested places and practices, especially in cities like Cape Town, with histories of racist urban planning, where ongoing uneven development maintains spatial divides and makes mobility an unequally distributed resource. In South Africa, persistent apartheid geography that continues to normalize severe racial and class disparity is made visible and reproduced through schooling patterns and outcomes (Hunter 2019). At the same time, youth and educators (in school and beyond) approach
education as both a site and a strategy of struggle in seeking the inextricable goals of racial and spatial justice. This chapter draws on encounters and conversations concerning the relationships between schooling, locality, and mobility to argue that the production of aspiration at Launch is accomplished in part through a spatial pedagogy that attempts to challenge apartheid geography and spatial logics as a means of forging alternative futures, yet remains entrenched in the open and complicated questions of land and location that animate broader politics in South Africa.

Aspiration is a spatial imaginary in the postapartheid city, one mediated by the uneven geographies and unequal conditions of possibility that have constituted colonial, apartheid, and neoliberal racial capitalism. By tracing the movement of Launch learners, alumni, staff, and families through Cape Town’s fractured landscape, I develop the concept of “spatial pedagogy,” which I define as the educative dimension of spatial practices that elucidate, entrench, or disrupt established social geography and patterns of movement. Or, as the school’s founder puts it, “the power of space to unlock difficult conversations by shifting children’s worldviews.” At Launch, spatial pedagogy is evident in both the various locations the school itself has occupied and in the transgressive movements that the school facilitates across contested urban terrain. These transgressions deeply impact learners’ perceptions—of themselves, their surroundings, their potential for social and spatial mobility, and their possible futures. Spatial pedagogy is tied to the larger aspirational politics of the school, which is framed as a site through which youth can stretch beyond the conditions of possibility imposed by racist enclosure. This chapter’s central aim is to extend anthropological perspectives on youth futures and the politics of possibility that center temporality (Stambach and Hall 2017) by illustrating the spatial dimensions of aspiration. I also aim to reveal how critical geographies of education (Hunter
2020; Nguyen, Cohen, and Huff 2017) can be stretched by engaging Black geographies scholarship that foregrounds entanglements between the social production of space and the social construction of race, but also highlights creative practices that resist and undo geographies of domination and exclusion (Hawthorne 2019; Lipsitz 2011; McKittrick 2006).

The chapter begins with an exploration of how “The Map Cuts Up, The Story Cuts Across,” tracing how the historically entangled processes of place-making and race-making that have shaped Cape Town’s politics of location also framed the establishment of the school itself, through its origins in a bridging project between neighboring segregated areas. In the following two sections, I highlight various aspects of Launch’s spatial pedagogy. First, I explore “Schooling Location,” how perceptions of the school have evolved in relation to the places where it has taken up residence, as well as relationships the school has established across the boundaries of Cape Town’s contested geography for the purposes of both enrichment and service that support its core motto of “educating tomorrow’s leaders.” In this section, I focus primarily on the flagship school’s 2017 relocation from Pinelands, a formerly “White” area, to Langa, the township it serves. The move evoked a range of reactions that surfaced a core paradox of the school’s progressive attempts to disrupt spatial hierarchies and the spatial politics of aspiration in a postapartheid city. Second, I focus on Launch’s attempts at “Teaching to Transgress” (hooks 1994) by accompanying learners, staff, and alumni on school excursions into Cape Town spaces formerly designated “White,” including the city center and beach fronts, and I explore their perspectives on the impacts of these experiences. I conclude by examining the larger discourse of “claiming space” that permeates the school, discussing how it echoes broader social movements promoting spatial consciousness and justice within Cape Town’s contested landscape, and
grappling with its limitations and contradictions. Overall, the chapter contributes to a growing critical geography of education and to educational anthropology on youth futures and pedagogies of aspiration by arguing that aspiration, typically conceptualized in temporal terms, is also a geographic imaginary produced at Launch by a spatial pedagogy that teaches youth to transgress the fractures of a divided city.

2.2 The Map Cuts Up, The Story Cuts Across

“*The Launch story starts long before Joseph even formed Launch school, the ‘classroom school’ like this.*” Sonwabile gestured around the room where we had arranged to sit down for a conversation about Launch’s history. Things had come full circle for him. He was there that morning serving as an exam invigilator in the very same classrooms where he had attended St. Augustine’s pre-school in the 70s, classrooms now occupied by Launch, a high school founded and directed by his former teacher and coach, Joseph. Though Sonwabile never attended or worked for Launch in an official capacity, he was one of the first parents of the school, and I had taken notice that, though his daughter had long since graduated, the current learners and teachers still seemed to recognize him as an authority figure. As a star cricket and hockey player born and raised in Langa, he had been part of the first wave of Black students to integrate Forest High, the neighboring formerly White public high school where Launch’s founder, Joseph, taught in the late 80s and early 90s. As a white Capetonian, Joseph’s longstanding relationships with prominent Langa community members like Sonwabile helped facilitate his access and reputation in the township when he eventually established Launch.

26 de Certeau 1984

27 An exam proctor.
Sonwabile’s claim that Launch’s story starts “long before” the actual school generated affirmative nods from me. As a former history teacher, I was sympathetic to his constant emphasis on knowing the backstory, a sense of how things ended up as they are. I assumed that he was referring to the origin story I had heard many times from teachers, past students, and Joseph himself. Through helping to found and coach the Langa Hockey Club\(^{28}\) in the late 1980s, which produced several players that went on to compete at the provincial and national levels, Joseph became more conscientized to apartheid educational inequity. As an English teacher at Forest High, a liberal-leaning formerly White-classified school that voluntarily began to desegregate before the end of the apartheid regime, he became involved in trying to bridge racial divides. Seeing teaching as “a way of changing something,” he worked with other staff to start an educational assistance program. In 1990, spurred by the momentum of Nelson Mandela’s release from prison, they began providing tutoring and enrichment in maths, science, and English for Langa students, and facilitated exchanges between White and Black students in the segregated high schools of these bordering areas. The program continued after the 1994 transition but the practice of busing students from Langa to Pinelands to be “enriched” came under critique. As Joseph had explained to me previously, “The schools themselves said ‘Can’t we run the programs at the schools and then move the teachers? If you’re busing people out of their community, you’re telling them nothing good happens at their own schools.’ So we ran for about

\(^{28}\) The Langa Hockey Club and the older Langa Cricket Club are township leagues both started as part of larger attempts at desegregation through sport. As a 2016 Mail & Guardian article on the club stated, “most black youngsters prefer to hone their skills in football”. Mark Hunter (2019) argues in his research on schooling in Durban that racialization of sports has played a role in the desegregation of formerly White schools. When they desegregated, “it was not sports with a long history of multiracial teams, notably soccer, that attracted scholarships, but ‘White sports’”—rugby, cricket, hockey (Hunter 2019, 125). Leagues like this one have helped increase Black youth participation in these sports and thus admission and bursaries to formerly White schools.
7-8 years at the Langa schools. Then community members became uneasy with the notion of White teachers attempting to ‘save’ Black children. So we shifted to working with teachers and principals.” Feeling the program to be inadequate since the tutees still were not passing the matric exam, Joseph established Launch in 2004 as a no-fee, independent, STEM-focused high school for Langa youth that offered math and science classes not typically available at township high schools; lack of such classes created barriers to studying a range of disciplines at South Africa’s top higher education institutions. By then, I knew the school’s origin story well.

But Sonwabile’s “long before” comment that day actually gestured much further back to a more complex narrative. I didn’t realize just how far back he would start Launch’s story until he revealed that our main order of business would be a visit to the Langa Pass Museum, about ten minutes’ walk from the school. The museum is located in Langa’s old pass office and court, built in the early 1960s as part of influx control measures that helped to construct the country’s enduring apartheid geography by limiting and controlling the movement of Black people into and within urban areas. Racist pass systems predate apartheid: as far back as the 18th century, Dutch Cape Colonial requirements forced enslaved people to carry passes authorizing their movements within Cape Town and surrounding areas (Frankel 1979). Influx control measures were also techniques of British colonial and Union governance in South Africa. Yet the 1948 election of the National Party and introduction of formalized apartheid further tightened restrictions, designating urban areas across the country out of bounds for Black South Africans, except for stringent labor criteria. Laws required them to carry a reference book, disparagingly

29 The reference book included date of birth, racial/ethnic classification, and residential rights. Black people over 16 had to carry it at all times and offer it for scrutiny whenever asked by police or authorities.
called a “dompas,” at all times in both public and private places (Breckenridge 2014). In the Western Cape, this was exacerbated by the 1955 Coloured Labour Preference Policy that further entrenched hierarchical racial classifications and notions of separate development by favoring laborers who were classified as “Coloured” and aiming to “repatriate” or deport “Africans” to the Bantustans as a measure of influx control with the larger goal of maintaining a white majority in the province (Humphries 1992). Throughout apartheid, relations between Langa and Pinelands were heavily restricted, yet paradoxically intimate, given that Langa residents were employed as domestic laborers, gardeners, and service workers in the area in a similar arrangement as townships across the country. The Langa pass office and court was one of two sites in the entire Cape Peninsula where pass law transgressors were detained, prosecuted, and sentenced to fines, prison, and/or deportation (Ralphs 2008). After surveying residents about whether to demolish or transform this site of apartheid brutality, a group of residents called the Langa Heritage Foundation began working with governmental and nongovernmental agencies in 2001 to develop the museum, which opened its doors in 2011. It chronicles the central place that Langa, the first formal township in Cape Town and one of the oldest in South Africa, occupies in the history of the Western Cape and the country. It is part of larger city-backed efforts to memorialize historical sites in the township (Field 2008; Ralphs 2008). Sonwabile’s invitation signaled that, in order to understand Launch’s history, I had to understand Langa’s history and how it fits into Cape Town and South Africa’s larger landscape. Langa’s construction as well as its relationship to the

30 Afrikaans for “dumb pass.”

31 Bantustans or homelands were nominally independent, ethnically-defined rural territories that the National Party set aside for Black inhabitation as part of its apartheid program of “separate development”. The granting of “independent”, self-governing status was largely rejected by anti-apartheid movements as an apartheid regime strategy of excluding Black people from full citizenship and political representation in South Africa.
neighboring formerly white area of Pinelands, although particular, is emblematic of larger racialized spatial arrangements that continue to shape all of the sites across South Africa where Launch has now developed schools.

As we strolled down the street, frequently stopping for Sonwabile to greet people gathered at a shipping container tuck shop, a taxi stop, and the Guga S’Thebe community center, he narrated the interconnections between the story of South Africa, the story of Cape Town and Langa, the story of Launch, and his personal story. In 1988, the year he started high school, Isilimela Comprehensive was the second high school to open in Langa. The first, Langa High, had been established in 1937 after winning permission from resistant White authorities (Bickford-Smith, van Heyningen, and Worden 1999). Limiting African secondary education outside the Bantustans was consistent with policies subsequently laid out in the Bantu Education Act of 1954 and the larger aim of colonial and apartheid governments to construct Black South Africans as “foreign natives” granted temporary permission to work in “White” urban areas (Hirson 1979). Describing his first high school, Sonwabile explained,

Comprehensive schools were introduced by the apartheid government and they intended to provide skills to children. They were not ‘academic’ schools if you want to put it that way. You were going to do woodwork, motor mechanics, welding, home economics for girls to cook and all that. Skills. By the time I was hitting the high school level, Comp [Isilimela Comprehensive] was introduced. So I went there. Why? Langa High School was the only high school in Langa up until that point. But my parents didn’t want me to go to Langa High because of what was happening—politics, lots of chaos.

The late 1970s and 1980s are often characterized as the most volatile period of antiapartheid resistance, when youth played a central role in movements to make townships ungovernable, exemplified in calls for liberation before education (Alexander 1990, 14; Nekhwevha 1992, 1). Langa youth played a major role in sustained opposition to Bantu
Education policies, most notably on August 11, 1976, when Black students from several Western Cape townships that were demonstrating in solidarity with the Soweto youth slain two months prior were met with police violence that left thirty-three dead. When Langa High students marched on the police station to demand release of those detained, one of their classmates was killed. The following month two thousand youth from Langa, Gugulethu, and Nyanga townships sought to increase publicity and make the conflict felt in the undisturbed White areas by marching on Cape Town’s city center, where they were met with teargas, beatings, and buckshot (Hirson 1979; Nekhwevha 1992; South African History Online 2022a). An August 1976 solidarity statement from students at Athlone High School, designated Coloured by the apartheid government, captured the spirit of youth uprising proclaiming, “we are prepared to sacrifice everything, our carefully planned careers and aspirations, for the ensurance of a better and more just future” (Counter Information Services 1977). Boycotts against Bantu Education continued through the 70s and 80s. Langa students vowed not to attend classes, but rather than deserting their school, transformed it into a central meeting place for Cape Town youth to organize for their demands—demands for democratic, nonracial, equal education; release of the detained; and equal jobs and pay for their parents and all workers (Hirson 1979; Nekhwevha 1992). However, this eventually led to a crisis, particularly in Cape Town’s African high schools (Nekhwevha 1992), as youth sacrificed their education through commitments to indefinite boycott without clarity about “the nature of the boycott as a weapon of struggle” (Alexander 1990, 13).

32 For an illuminating study on how antiapartheid youth uprisings varied in the context of KwaZulu Natal, where youth navigated both the nationwide politics of the ANC and United Democratic Front (coalition of over 400 antiapartheid organizations including trade unions, student groups, etc) and the regional influence of the Inkatha Freedom Party, see Sibusisiwe Nombuso Dlamini’s Youth and Identity Politics in South Africa, 1990-94 (2005).
Sonwabile described his encounter with Joseph through sport as offering him a way out of both the oppressive education enforced by the apartheid regime and what he described as the “chaos” that had erupted in township schools in opposition.

The education then during my years was not really the same kind of education as today where there are more opportunities being given to kids. When I was at my high school level I played sport, like football and cricket, but then in the late 1980s we were introduced to field hockey. We started to form a club, the Langa Hockey Club, as early as 1986, 87. And South Africa then was talking about freeing Nelson Mandela and, and, and, what kind of ideas they were having. Early 1990s I was right in the middle of high school and all the so-called White schools were starting to open up their doors because they wanted to be part of the “new” South Africa—then—because Mandela was talking about (changes voice as if to impersonate Nelson Mandela) “we’re gonna be in a democratic country” you know? “So education needs to be open to everybody, needs to be free for everybody.” Fortunately for me I had played sport against a school called Forest and I wasn’t bad in my sporting abilities, or my schooling abilities. I met a guy called Joseph and I said, “Listen, what are the chances of me coming to your school?”

As he tells it, he was “fortunate” enough to be good at sports. Though he was almost finished with Grade 10, when Joseph facilitated his admission to the neighboring White school in 1990, he agreed to start over again in Grade 9 to strengthen his English.

The challenge was to take the forms back home to my grandparents because I knew they couldn’t afford it. My grandmother signed because my grandfather didn’t understand anything written down. I took the forms back and my first question was “How am I going to pay school fees? How am I going to get the uniform, how am I going to get books?” And Joseph said “Don’t worry. We’ll sort out something.”

While Sonwabile and several peers from Langa boosted the athletic prowess of schools formerly closed to them, their access did not typically result in shifted life trajectories. For some, it simply amplified the gulf they were attempting to bridge. While his wealthy White classmates on a tertiary track were grappling introspectively with the often raised question of “what do you want to do?”, his family’s conditions led him to bypass further study for work. He and Joseph stayed in touch when they both transitioned from Forest High. When Joseph began teaching at a
private high school that was part of the for-profit ADvTech group, Sonwabile frequently challenged him on why he was teaching wealthy children when more quality schools were needed in Langa. Later, Sonwabile’s oldest daughter was one of Launch’s earliest graduates.

When we turned onto Washington Street and approached the Langa Pass Museum, Sonwabile was not surprised to see that it was closed. He told me to wait there while he sorted things out. As I sat on one of the recently installed benches adorned with a colorful mosaic, another initiative of the Langa Heritage Foundation, I gazed up and down Washington Street, noticing the mosaic plinths commemorating township history and figures that I had passed many times. One that I had somehow overlooked jumped out. It depicted two students, recognizable from their uniforms, marching in the street, one holding a book and the other holding both arms up in triumph. I walked up to view it closer and read the words on the side: “11 August 1976: School children gathered and marched in a peaceful demonstration against the education system. Xolile Mosi was shot and killed.” I spotted Sonwabile walking toward the museum chatting with a man in a security guard uniform and gesturing for me to come back.

Inside the museum, there is one main exhibit. Old benches from pass court proceedings occupy the center of the room. Along the walls are storyboards charting Langa’s history, including photographs and firsthand accounts. A glass case in the center of the room displays several dompases and transcripts from oral history interviews conducted with Langa residents by researchers at Cape Town’s Centre for Popular Memory. Despite the single room, there is a lot to take in. Every now and then, Sonwabile pointed something out to offer context, but mostly he hung back chatting with the guard, offering me space to read and digest. On our walk back to school, he reiterated that a view of the longer history is necessary to understand the significance
of what Launch now aims to provide for kids “elokshini.” The field trip he curated for me that day initially pointed my attention to Launch’s spatial pedagogy and its salience by framing the multivalent significance of “location” in a postapartheid city where apartheid geography persists.

33 “In the location.” Vernacular terms frequently used for the township are derived from the English word “location”—lokshini—or the Afrikaans word “lokasie”—kasi—and draw on the colonial and apartheid history of designating segregated and restricted spaces for Black South Africans, originally labeled “Native locations.”
Figure 3 (top left): Mosaic plinth commemorating Langa, Nyanga, and Gugulethu student uprisings on August 11 1976, particularly Xolile Mosi who was shot and killed.

Figure 4 (top right): View inside Langa Museum, formerly a pass office and court.

Figure 5 (bottom): Image from the Langa Museum of protesting students carrying chalkboards with slogans demanding the release of detained classmates in August 1976.
2.3 Schooling Location: “A Model C School in the Township”

“We’re turning every place into a school,” Zimasa told me with a chuckle as we passed by roaring harmonies generated by students holding choir practice in a kitchen. She was giving me a tour of Launch 3, located in a large home in the wealthy Sandton area of Johannesburg, but attended by students from the bordering township of Alexandra. Though my research focused on the flagship school in Cape Town, I had embarked on a journey to visit each school in the national network to get a sense of the different contexts in which Launch operates. Zimasa was a school leader at Launch’s third school, but she grew up in Langa and was a member of Launch’s 2007 graduating class, the first class that attended from grades 9–12. We met in Cape Town in 2014, when she was studying for her B.Ed. through the Tomorrow’s Leaders program and I was a visiting teacher educator. We stayed in touch in between my trips to South Africa, with her frequently sending me thought-provoking social media posts via WhatsApp, many directly commenting on spatial politics in South Africa. In one YouTube video she sent, two Black photographers from Langa conducted a “reverse township tour” as a commentary on the booming industry of township tourism, often billed as a sort of cultural immersion into poverty for White tourists and a form of social responsibility. The Langa artists, Andiswa Mkhosi and Sabelo Makheba, filmed themselves touring Cape Town’s affluent formerly and still predominantly White beachfront neighborhood of Camps Bay and taking photos without permission of residents doing mundane activities like walking their dogs. They framed it, and the criticism it provoked, as a “social experiment” to “make a point about ownership of spaces” (Cowie 2015).

34 Launch only added Grade 8 later.
After completing her degree and teacher certification through the Tomorrow’s Leaders program, Zimasa moved to Johannesburg to add a valuable alumna perspective to the faculty of the newly launched third school. We were using the tour of the site as a chance to catch up. Her joke about “turning every place into a school” stuck with me as I started to think more carefully about spatial pedagogy in terms of the physical spaces across the country that Launch had repurposed into schools—a private house, an abandoned hospital, a warehouse, a barn—and the larger politics of location. When I returned to Cape Town and had an opportunity to sit down with Joseph, founder and director, I asked him to tell me about Launch’s locations.

As we sipped rooibos tea in Launch’s administrative offices in a former orphanage, we talked about the school’s history of repurposing disused spaces. According to Joseph, he and the co-founding staff had aimed to build schools where the centerpiece was not the physical space, but the “sanctity of teaching and learning moments, the sanctity of relationships, the relational framework of a school and the values framework of a school.” Offering a practice-oriented conception of space, he explained “We operate on the very simple principle that what you do in whatever space you’ve got is more important than what the space defines.” As our conversation continued, he began to tie Launch’s approach to space to its larger model and position it against other types of institutions within South Africa’s schooling landscape and broader spatial politics.

*When we first conceptualized Launch I was reacting very strongly to the assumption that school renewal or school start up is essentially driven by space. What has happened in our country because of the polarized history is that spaces occupied by privileged people have a particular kind of beauty and veneer that is really to be envied at some level. So you just drive through the fields and buildings of privileged schools and you think “well, how can people not be successful here?” You know there’s an assumption there and yet, in many ways those schools have failed South Africa. I’d always been angry with privileged schooling for its inability to provide anything useful for schools that were not,*
an inability to distill or share something, but always a very patronizing “We’ll do this for you. We’ll build a thing then take a photo and go” a very traditional White philanthropic mindset. I think in the next three to four years, these privileged schools are going to come under siege from a society that’s had enough. These spaces are refined for so few people that they have very little actually to do with the whole experience.

Joseph is intimately familiar with the “beauty and veneer” of privileged schools, as he attended one of the oldest and most prestigious public high schools in South Africa, located on a breathtaking 35 hectare (86 acre) campus on the eastern buttress of Cape Town’s renowned Table Mountain. Founded in the mid 1800s, it now boasts state-of-the-art classrooms, laboratories, libraries, technology and media centers, fully equipped indoor and outdoor gyms, a heated swimming pool, two hockey astros, four courts each for squash, tennis, and basketball, fields for cricket, rugby and more, a coffee shop, multiple halls and auditoriums, and an amphitheater.

Discussing his “settler history” from a family of English and Scottish roots, he confessed that, as the son of an evangelical plumber who was guaranteed training and work by the apartheid regime, “White privilege guaranteed me a good education, despite my family’s working class origins.” Yet, he struggled with the school’s conformity-based traditions and emphasis on discipline and authority through practices like caning—a struggle that drove his eventual work as a teacher and school leader.

Describing the upper tier of South Africa’s growing “affordable” private school sector, particularly those that operate in for-profit chains catering to middle class and aspirant middle class families, he also questioned their ability to address urgent issues in the wider system of South African schooling, and distinguished Launch from this model. Having worked briefly as a teacher in one of these chains, he has familiarity with this sector of the multi-tiered system, too.
Schools like Curro and ADvTECH, they’re not education businesses, they’re property businesses. They just buy property and the schools pay the rental. They have huge property portfolios and everyone loves it because the share prices go up and the more they acquire the more the prices go up. And of course those schools are built on the pretext of a poor government system, so they can charge what they like. Whereas, we’re trying to make Launch a forerunner for what government schooling can be. So we’re trying to position Launch not as a model to be replicated at the expense of community schooling, we want our schools to reflect that community schooling can work without corporate breakoff. If we’re doing something that costs more than it would cost the government, we’re not staying true to our mandate. We have to create space with budgets that are real, not budgets that, just because we can raise the money, we do. That’s no model for anything. We must not fall into the sustainability trap of thinking that property is how you’re going to sustain your organization. It’s going to shift our focus all the time to thinking of building a portfolio.

Despite Joseph describing Launch as a model for “community schooling” and the fact that Launch’s oldest school has always served students from Langa, it was not originally located in the township. In its eighteen-year history it has occupied multiple spaces across distinct neighborhoods, gradually moving from town\textsuperscript{35} into the township it serves in what he describes as an effort to undo spatial hierarchies by countering the notion that families must leave their neighborhoods to access quality education. While for-profit low-fee private schools like the ones described above can afford to construct or purchase attractive buildings, Launch is funded by individual and corporate donations, relatively low school fees, and state subsidies, limiting their capacity for capital expenditure. In fact, Launch was a no-fee independent school for the first twelve years of its existence, operating entirely off of donor funding and state subsidies. Thus, they have operated out of modest spaces where rents were within their budget, often through

\textsuperscript{35} Colloquially, Cape Town is referred to as simply “town.” This typically refers to the city center and formerly White areas more proximate to it. Use of “town” in this manner is common all over the country where cities were constructed as “White” space with areas for Black labor force inhabitation located on their peripheries. This geographic separation and its legacies are palpable “across the country at all scales — from cities like Cape Town and Johannesburg to the smallest villages” (Findley and Ogbu 2011).
connections from board members and funders. Their first two sites were in town. For the first two years they operated out of a warehouse in a deindustrializing area that was being redeveloped into a business park, located in one of Cape Town’s few “grey areas”—areas that either managed to avoid complete segregation, or were racially mixed before apartheid was eradicated (Posel 1991). Joseph commented:

> It was actually quite ideal, it was reshaped to be a training center in this warehouse, so we just took it on as it was, we got all the equipment donated, the desks and the chairs and people were closing their businesses and gave us things, up to the kettle and the photocopier and everything. We were paying rent, but we did nothing to the building, we just moved in as it was. We then began to do a little bit of painting, a little bit of rebranding, a little bit of color, like we’re doing again now in this old building.

Lauch’s second location, from 2006–2015, was a bit closer to Langa, in the bordering area of Pinelands. Through a board member who was also on the board of one of the oldest investment groups in South Africa, they were offered a space once used as a training center for employees. It was located on the edge of a golf course and cohabited with a private, not-for-profit business school also founded in 2004 with a mission of providing affordable post-secondary qualifications for youth from marginalized backgrounds. Joseph explains that “it was ideal in that it was close to a [train] station, and there was enough parking, and it was relatively close to Langa.”

In 2017, Launch relocated from Pinelands to Langa when space became available for rent at the St. Augustine Adult Educational Centre. This had been established by the Catholic Church in 1971, and over its history had been home to a night school for unemployed adults, a preschool (the one Sonwabile attended), a church, a computer training center, a refugee language program, a driver education school, a rehabilitation center for people who have been physically disabled, a pensioner’s club, and more. During apartheid, White educators on staff entered the township
illegally to teach. The facility reflects the apartheid-era standard of township schooling architecture, with double-story classroom blocks connected by covered corridors that open onto a concrete courtyard closed off by locked barred gates. Describing the significance of Launch’s move into the space, Joseph explained,

*The original vision of the St. Augustine Centre was to start a beautiful pre-school, a primary school right across the way, and then a high school. The high school never really took off and it became a finishing school. If you failed matric, then you would go back there and do more subjects and it ran as a finishing school plus night school during the 80s very successfully then lost its way during the 90s. So I think the joy of that space is that we are reinvigorating the original intention. What I see in that space now is the potential for precinct upgrade. For Launch to be part of creating a hub, doing the early childhood development work, drawing in other partners who do technology work or do social enterprise work, and that hub can be a really creative space.*

Reflecting on the different locations Launch has occupied and the implicit lessons from their use of space, he shared, “*I think there’s a symbolism to the way we use space. We do big work in broken spaces. In the adopting of a space, the reclaiming of space, and generating some good in a precinct, we make Launch work wherever we are.*”

Part of making Launch work in any location, whether warehouse or schoolhouse, has actually been facilitating connections to spaces beyond its buildings to achieve varying curricular aims. As described in the school manual, “*Each Launch school forms a reciprocal partnership with an established and well-resourced school. Each school will also initiate its own social development programme, partnering with other community schools and organisations in the community from which its students are drawn.*” Through these partnerships, students travel to a range of city areas within and beyond the township on a regular basis. One type of partnership is “twinning” with affluent schools to access academic and sports facilities and facilitate exchange across race-class divides. Twinning is not unique to Launch. Partnerships between wealthy
schools in formerly White areas and poorly resourced schools in townships have proliferated since the postapartheid transition. Some policymakers and scholars frame twinning as means to bridge inequality, “achieve nonracialism” (Mtshali and Ndaba 2014), and advance social justice (Badat and Sayed 2014; Mthethwa 2019) through the sharing of teaching resources and infrastructure like laboratories and athletic facilities not typically available at no-fee government schools. Yet, as Joseph pointed out earlier, the politics of these partnerships are fraught, often reinscribing racial and spatial hierarchies through a “White philanthropic mindset” characterized by “patronizing” attitudes focused on photo ops, as opposed to facilitating deeper exchange.

The flagship Launch school partners with Anglican High, one of the oldest schools in Cape Town, whose former headmaster has served as chair of Launch’s board. Anglican was founded in the mid 1800s in the English grammar school tradition with instructors from Oxbridge backgrounds to “educate youth of the colony.” Beyond an aim to spark “difficult conversations,” Joseph admitted that both sides had pragmatic motivations. Launch needed space. “We had a dependency on using science laboratories and we didn’t have enough classrooms at one point so we bused children to Anglican to use their labs and one or two extra classrooms.” Anglican needed to maintain its liberal character by addressing demands for transformation in ways that weren’t threatening to its wealthy White base. While Anglican has a multiracial student body, it is only accessible to families that can afford the high fees and, like other elite schools in South Africa, it faces White parent pressure to use its selective admission to admit the “right Blacks” that can assimilate to its norms of “White tone” and maintain a careful balance of student demographics to avoid the White flight that ensued at some formerly White
schools that were perceived as “going Black” after the transition (Hunter 2019, 133). “When we started the relationship with Anglican we challenged them by saying, ‘You’re never going to get your school into a space which reflects the demography of this country. Help and support work which is truly intentioned to create opportunity for access to quality education.’ There’s a pragmatism in that.”

Still, Launch’s staff try not to reproduce the “White philanthropic” dynamic in their partnerships with some of the most elite schools across South Africa, several of whom have in fact facilitated connections with patrons that have funded Launch schools. While each Launch class visits Anglican after school one Thursday a month in a rotation from Grade 8-11 in order to participate in academic, athletic, or artistic activities, they initially insisted on Anglican HS students visiting Launch regularly, too, not as benefactors, but to also be enriched by shared activities like matches with Launch’s award-winning debate team and concerts led by their outstanding choir. To reject the notion that they are simply beneficiaries, Launch staff promote their students’ sense of autonomy and voice as they navigate these spaces. Both have at times become points of contention. After Launch relocated to the township, visits from Anglican HS students noticeably declined. By the 2018 school year when I returned for a longer research stint, that side of the exchange had halted altogether and Launch students were the only ones making the trek. These shifts were palpable when I accompanied Launch learners to Anglican midway through the year.

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36 Hunter argues that “going Black” in this case is specifically read as “going African”, given that the hierarchical racialization of apartheid made white schools more amenable to granting access to students classified as Coloured and Indian in the wake of the transition.

37 Grade 12 students don’t participate, since any enrichment time is used for matric exam preparation.
In the bus ride from Launch, we passed dense township areas of matchbox houses, shipping container structures, and corrugated tin shacks, so when we disembarked in the wealthy suburb of Rondebosch, the campus’s lush, expansive grounds and imposing buildings hit me with incredible intensity. As I followed students on the long walk from the parking lot across a massive green that was being tended by two Black staff, the high school’s excessive stateliness and sheer abundance of space felt downright startling. It was especially startling because I had been shadowing a past Launch student and teacher, now teacher educator, to no-fee government schools a stone’s throw away. In some instances fifty to sixty students were packed into tiny, poorly ventilated spaces. The students began to veer off toward various fields and buildings for their assigned activities and their teacher trailed behind. I spotted a group of students I knew from interactions with Launch’s debate team, and shadowed them to a classroom where students from both schools competed in chess matches. Listening in on a conversation between an Anglican and a Launch student, who clearly knew each other from previous exchanges, I overheard the Anglican student sharing details of a recent family trip to Morocco over the school holiday. The Launch student responded with affirmations and follow up questions, sharing nothing about his break. A question about how he spent his holiday never followed.

On a search to locate the other groups of students, I got lost and wandered through a well-equipped music studio and an impressive art gallery featuring student work professionally hung with museum-like reverence before I found a campus map that directed me toward the swimming complex. I took a seat at the bottom of the bleachers and watched a single Grade 10 Launch student learning to tread water in an ten-lane, Olympic sized pool, while his swim instructor, an older looking Anglican student, floated next to him occasionally offering an encouraging word or
tip, but mostly chatting to a few friends seated at the side of the pool, presumably matrics judging from the distinct blazers and badges they wore. As I headed back toward the parking lot to wait for students, I noticed a cluster of Launch girls stretched out in the perfectly manicured grass who had opted out of activities that day altogether at this all-boys high school. When I asked what they were up to, one girl explained their decision to enjoy the monthly opportunity to sunbathe in the leafy sanctuary since they had forgotten swim attire. One student read a book, two were chatting, and one had her eyes closed, perhaps napping, perhaps simply luxuriating. I joined them.

I planned to continue accompanying learners on future Thursday excursions to Anglican, but the extent to which the partnership had broken down became clear when I learned from Lukhanyo, a Launch alumnus and teacher, that they had been halted until further notice. Apparently, the sight of idle Launch students enjoying the green space had so disturbed one of the Anglican teachers that they complained, and the program was postponed until after a meeting between Launch’s leadership and Anglican’s new leader. Given the echo of a painful history that rendered the non-laboring Black person in White space as aberrant and, indeed, criminal, the entire incident required a debrief. While both schools were committed to continuing the program and to the idea that there was something pedagogical about spending time in each other’s spaces, they struggled to do so without replicating the political dynamics of space as constructed by colonial and apartheid geography and maintained in the present by the inequality inherent to racial capitalism.

Lukhanyo echoed the view that twinning in South Africa has been a failed project largely about privileged schools being able to “feel good about the fact that they have partners in a
community like Langa,” but pointed out that Launch had been able to “push back” in ways that benefited both schools. In earlier days of the partnership they had regular debriefs and Anglican “walked on eggs” wanting to get it right, but they have had ups and downs with changing cycles of leadership at both schools. He explained that it begins to break down when “it doesn’t feel co-constructed, when it’s something where we can participate in and they hold the keys to what ‘participation’ will be.” Commenting on the twinning relationships at all six Launch schools across the country, Joseph explained, “some partnerships are showing themselves to be really empowering for our students and some aren’t.”

Students pointed to the benefits of the Thursday visits for their future ability to navigate university or employment spaces in wealthier, multiracial contexts. Launch alumnus Mpumelelo credited the exchanges with Anglican for exposing him to both spaces and social interactions across race and class lines in a way that lessened the culture shock of transitioning from living in the township to studying and boarding at one of the country’s top universities.

I got to speak on a friend basis with a White person for the first time. I saw that it was possible for me to have friends outside the same economic conditions that I am subjected to, and it was genuine conversations, like human experience. Every Thursday we would go to Anglican and interact, play games, do civics activities. Those spaces affected how I have experienced life. It was not new for me now when I went to university and interacted with White people or people from other races or from other social groups. It was not shocking because I was prepared by Launch and the different places we went to.

Students also insisted they were not simply beneficiaries receiving gifts from privileged schools, but that those schools had a lot to learn from Launch, particularly in terms of their “relational framework.” Sinelizwi, a Grade 12 student, explained: “It’s not like we can’t compare ourselves to Anglican. They’re privileged on the money side and maybe on the education side, but they’re
not emotionally intelligent. Here we want to know how your day was, ‘how are you?’ People will say ‘We see a change in you.’ They won’t see a change in you. We shared that with them.”

Another aspect of Launch’s extension beyond its walls is partnerships with schools and community development initiatives in the communities where they are based. In Langa, Launch continues to support “extra classes” in the high schools that date back to their prehistory as a bridging effort in the 90s, and alumni intern teachers run tutoring at feeder primary schools. Due to a local reputation still tied to the earlier project of White teachers venturing into the township for uplift, and the high profile of its founder and first principal, who has long since passed the leadership mantle to former students from Langa while he runs the national network, the struggle in these partnerships has been for Launch not to take on the position of the privileged school doling out gifts in its relations to the Langa community. As an education startup with support from various foundations, and connections to social entrepreneurs running myriad educational projects, Launch was able to redirect funds and resources into partner organizations in Langa. Joseph explained that this also risked turning the institution into a “blesser” in ways that reproduced the race-class power dynamics they were attempting to disrupt. For example, a computer room and server at one of Langa’s no-fee government high schools was funded and set up via Launch’s connections to an EdTech justice initiative. These dynamics were at play when I accepted an invitation to visit the school in question to get a deeper sense of other Langa high schools. The principal had arranged to meet with me to share more about the school and learn about my research, but when I arrived, he spent about twenty minutes searching for the keys to

38 After-school tutoring, specifically in maths and science

39 “Blesser” is a South African slang term for a “sugar daddy.” During my research, interlocutors used the terms blesser, blessee, and blessed in a variety of contexts to denote transactional relationships.
the aforementioned computer room so he could host me in that space. At the time, I had no idea of the backstory of these computers and I found it incredibly odd that we did not just meet in his office or the empty staff room where I was waiting. I also could not understand why he so desperately wanted me to access these computers when the students clearly could not, due to the room’s normally locked status to “avoid theft.” Later, when I found out their source, I realized he may have been reading me as some sort of inspector from Launch. Reflecting back, Joseph explained that “initially we fell into a patronage relationship,” but he noted that “the move brought a sharper focus on Launch now being IN Langa and brought the opportunity of working in closer collaboration.”

Students play the central role in stewarding Launch’s relations in the communities it serves through the school’s curricular component of “social development,” compulsory student and staff monthly participation in community development projects meant to make “small but significant contributions towards wider community transformation.” Several alumni recounted how, before the institutionalization of social development into the school’s model, it was actually an initiative started by students who wanted to avoid being alienated from their communities by being bused out daily and only returning after the long, extended school day. They aimed to redistribute resources they had access to, by virtue of being selected for Launch, to their peers attending Langa’s schools. One of the students who drove these early initiatives was Siphiwe, a 2007 alumna born and raised in Langa who now serves as principal of Launch. She described her Launch education as “an activation of my own role in my community” and told me that it had raised questions for her and her classmates that she and her colleagues continue to pose to
students now: “What are you really angry about in your own community? And who are you expecting to go and change that?”

For many students, the answer was spatial injustice. Langa youth often live in shacks, hostels or flats which are shared by more than one family, and they often have limited space and inadequate light to do their homework or study for exams. In 2004, Sphiwe and her peers applied to a shipping company for a donation of shipping containers that they converted into a study facility and gathering space for Langa students. Later they were able to secure a R50,000 grant and the support of an EdTech organization to equip the space with computers. Branded the Launch Learning Centre, but often still called “the container” by students, it has since become host to a soup kitchen; after school maths, science, and computer help; and a location for an annual Christmas celebration run by Launch students where primary school kids play games and receive gifts. I visited the site on many occasions, including when current students repainted the three containers and cleaned up the open courtyard they surround.

Once a month, multigrade groups of Launch students accompanied by a staff member visit sites they are paired with to contribute to local service. Now that the school has relocated to Langa, they walk to these sites. The first time I accompanied students in June to participate and observe, I arrived at the classroom where they were preparing to embark and found the students sitting in a circle discussing their plan for the visit. We would be visiting a crèche they had been working with since the beginning of the year. Their teacher was sitting at his desk, and it was clear that he was available to help, given the time I saw a student hand him some coloring pages and request copies, but he did not lead the conversation and appeared to be grading papers.

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40 Early child development center for preschool-aged kids.
Students were debating what the focus of their session would be. Zizipho, an enthusiastic and vocal Grade 8, insisted they should read a story to engage the kids. She was prepared with a Curious George book that she produced from her backpack and was heavily campaigning for it. While the other students indulged her, it was clear she was not the authority, judging from the hush and then approving nods and sounds when Lisakhanya, a Grade 11, spoke. “That’s a good idea. We can start with the story, but we should have a deeper message, something the kids will remember when we leave.” In this case, they also landed on issues of spatial injustice. The students started discussing neighborhood issues in the surrounding area of the crèche. One pointed out that there was a “squatter camp” nearby, and that there had been a recent tragic story in the news about children dying in a shack fire, one of a long line of similar incidents. Everyone agreed they would focus the heart of their visit on teaching the kids about fire safety.

When we arrived, the women running the crèche looked relieved to sit down or step outside. Launch students jumped into their routine of dishing out hot lunch portions to the adorable children as they sang days of the week and other nursery school songs in isiXhosa. All of the interactions happened in isiXhosa, so given my extremely limited knowledge, it was a context where I had to carefully watch and listen to discern what was happening. As the younger kids ate, Launch students began their story, but when Zizipho proudly read out the book title in her storytelling voice, one of her classmates interjected pointing out that they had not made a

41 An informal settlement.

42 News media outlets often refer to Cape Town as the “fire capital” of South Africa, where deadly conflagrations overwhelmingly occur in township informal settlements. The dense spatial layout, material used in dwelling construction, and use of paraffin stoves and lamps for cooking and light in contexts with no electricity often results in fires that, when met by Cape Town’s famous winds, spread only more rapidly (Davis 2017; News24 2015)
plan to translate. It would be boring for the kids to listen to an entire book in English. He and a classmate sprang into impromptu translator roles as Zizipho read, but the very first page elicited debate over the translation of “curious.” In trying to explain to the kids what it means to be curious, one translator said “umntu uthando izinto” (“a person who loves things”). When the other disagreed, they had a side conversation and landed on “umntu uthando ukwazi” (“A person who loves to know”). The book was Curious George Tadpole Trouble (2007), so it did not take long for more side chats to ensue about the proper translation of “lake,” given the varying and subtly distinct English and isiXhosa words for bodies of water. They gave up after a few pages once the kids started to finish eating and it seemed they were ready for the main lesson.

They began to ask the kids what they knew about fire. This generated excitement and raised hands because they had already been learning about it. One explained that you should not touch it. As Launch students probed with follow up questions, they explained the importance of keeping flammable items away from paraffin stoves or candles and taking care not to knock them over. When they asked what to do if there’s a fire, one kid jumped on the ground to roll, eliciting approval and applause, and explanations from Launch students about when to do that. Finally, they shared the emergency number 10111, had kids repeat it several times, and invited several up to practice writing it on the board. As we strolled through the Langa streets on our way back to Launch, students pointed out sites that were significant to them—a primary school, a church. In the distance, I noticed the beautiful ulterior view of the Table Mountain vista, which I often marveled at in town, from the vantage point of the township.

43 The dearth of children’s books in South Africa’s many African languages is an issue that a generation of young authors are highlighting and addressing, supported by organizations like Nal’ibali (isiXhosa for “here's the story”), which promotes indigenous language literacy (Nal’ibali 2019).
Students and alumni cited social development as a site that sparked their leadership aspirations, where they came to see themselves as people with contributions to offer their communities. They particularly commented on how spending time in community spaces “giving back” challenged their notions of giving and who is in a position to do it. Grade 12 student Xolisa explained that “usually people come to help us, we don’t help other people.” Reflecting on her days as a student, alumna teacher Thabisa shared, “It really just showed me that money is not everything, that I can have an impact in my community even if I don’t have money. When we visited old age homes, the grannies always enjoyed having us around, just being able to talk to us was enough for them. Caring for the young ones and elders helped me realize that we need each other.” Whereas Launch students contended with notions of being “enriched” in relationships with formerly White schools, they grappled with narratives of them “giving back” in their relationships with local schools and organizations in their community that positioned them as the benefactors. Many expressed hope that now that their new location in Langa would
lead to more of a horizontal role with the other high schools in particular, so as not to position Launch students as somehow better.

One example of this was when I accompanied the students to watch a UCT student performance of Athol Fugard’s acclaimed play *My Children! My Africa!* that was hosted for Langa’s matric students at a neighboring no-fee government high school. As the oldest Black high school in Cape Town, it had recently been selected as part of a pilot for a Western Cape policy model called “collaboration schools” that allows public schools to be managed and funded by nonstate entities. This had produced a new flow of funds into the school that resulted in the 2017 opening of a multimillion-rand school hall shortly after its eightieth anniversary. As I sat in the audience during intermission, I noticed matrics from the four other schools present milling about the room socializing in mixed groups indicated by the varying uniforms, while most Launch students notably stayed in their seats. The few that did move about were athletes who played in a Langa football league with kids from other schools. Reflecting on this experience later, Thandiwe echoed what I had heard many times from students, teachers, and families—that Launch was seen as “a Model C school in the township.” This was understood as both an insult and a compliment. It marked perceptions of the school’s quality of education (normatively measured by matric exams in the South African context) that were attractive to parents and guardians. But it also marked the school’s former location in Pinelands, which associated Launch students with Whiteness in ways that alienated them in the community.

*Before, when we used to go to Pinelands, it was like a look of respect to us, or envy sometimes. But when we went home, we stayed in the same locations, so it created distance in the community. Now that we’re here, they see us as a Model C school in the township, but there are a lot of mocking remarks that “whaaa! you guys have degraded” from a suburban area to Langa. They’re not aware that our education is still the same,*
it’s just the location. When we went to the play, it was awkward. We were not on our home
ground. We saw kids we went to elementary school with and we were strangers now.

The 2017 relocation into Langa was a turning point in the school’s history and sparked
debates about schooling, location, and mobility that helped to generate this chapter’s core
concept of “spatial pedagogy,” which I define as the educative dimension of spatial practices to
elucidate, entrench, or disrupt established social geography and patterns of movement. In my
conversations with Joseph, he argued that Launch schools’ attempts to work across apartheid
space that had cut people off from each other along constructed lines of race had the power to
“unlock difficult conversations by shifting children’s worldviews.” The move into Langa
certainly did that. It highlighted tensions between the goal of countering notions that nothing
good happens in the township, and the reality that townships were in fact constructed as
technologies of control and still operate as racist enclosures. It also surfaced a paradox of
competing aspirations. While the school’s social development program, its mission of “the
positive transformation of communities through the meaningful education of children in those
communities,” and its motto of “educating tomorrow’s leaders” all position Launch students as
future leaders in the townships they serve, students and families often see the school as a place
through which they can realize their aspirations to futures beyond the township. As Mpumelelo
told me, “The reason I went to Launch was the same reason for a lot of the kids. The school was
seen as this place where children are shaped to become something else that does not conform to,
you know, ‘township standards’ and that will take them on a better path.”

This was illustrated in an interesting response I got on several surveys. I intended the
question of “where do you see yourself in ten years?” colloquially, but unintentionally, the
phrasing prompted answers that were spatial in nature. It was perhaps indicative of poor question writing, but also reflective of a shared sentiment, that several students interpreted it literally and responded by naming wealthy Cape Town neighborhoods, all of them formerly White. While Joseph and most teachers, including many alumni raised in Langa, celebrated Launch’s move into the township as tied to the larger vision of “community schooling,” among students, alumni, and families there was debate over the significance of the relocation and the limits of defining “community” according to the lines of group areas created by apartheid engineering that aimed to relegate Black South Africans to urban peripheries.

Some students agreed with the aim to take on the discourse that “all the good has to come from outside, you move your children out, you move yourself out.” For example, Sinelizwi, a Grade 12 student greatly respected for his leadership of the Launch choir, echoed the notion that, in a schooling landscape where perceptions of quality are heavily influenced by location, facilities, and former racial classification, Launch counters the great discrepancies between school spaces by centering instead a relational framework:

Launch is not a place. It’s made up by its people. Because if you take Anglican High and take it to another location, actually there won’t be anything good coming there, because it’s not Anglican High anymore. Because they’ve relocated. Let’s take Anglican to here, to this place. It won’t be seen as Anglican anymore. Because fancy pools, fancy playground, fancy grass and all that, they won’t see that and it’s not Anglican anymore. That’s what I think is in their heads, that’s how people see it - if you change places, you’re actually changing everything. And that’s what Launch actually overcame. You change places. You’re still Launch. Nothing changes. We’re still the way that we were.

On the flip side, others doubted the extent to which the “overcoming” of place was possible when that place was the township. Several families removed their students from the school in the aftermath of Launch’s move. Even some who stayed frequently mentioned its former location as
a major attraction of the school. Xolisa’s mom “thought it would be a good idea to leave the township.” Nolubabalo’s sister (her guardian) “really liked the fact that Launch was in Pinelands and ended late, so she would not get the chance to be out in the streets.” Anathi, an alumna of Launch, did not mince words: “We were forced into townships and to put it crudely, townships are shit and it’s a survival-of-the-fittest kind of situation.”

Launch’s relocation did not just affect current students and families. Alumni had comments about it because of the effect it had on the prestige of their high school “name,” something of great consequence in the South African context (Hunter 2019). One alumna told me that when people at university ask her what high school she went to, a common status check, they usually follow up with “where is that?” and she still says “Pinelands” since that’s where it was when she attended—even though she is aware that it’s now located in Langa. While Launch does not have an old, recognized name that would register with her university peers like South Africa’s elite schools, the fact that it had a nice sounding name she could tie to Pinelands valorized it. “At university I noticed that people who went to public school in the township would always avoid the question of ‘what school did you go to?’ For me, I was able to say ‘Launch’ with pride, and that gave me confidence in relation to people who went to other schools that are private. I mean, just the name sounded nice in comparison to others.”

Mpumelelo, an actively involved alumni who had a reputation for frequently challenging school leaders, including Joseph, during and after his time as a student, directly rejected the notion of “reclaiming” the township. He explained that much of his adolescence had been a sort of internal exile from the multiple townships his family lived in as a result of frequent moving due to housing insecurity and his caregivers’ attempts to shield him from negative influences.
Like many students and alumni, he described himself as “from the Eastern Cape, but born and raised in Cape Town” and part of his mom’s initial attraction to Launch was its location outside of the township and the fact that the longer day and Saturday sessions allowed less time to socialize and potentially become susceptible to “social ills” in his neighborhoods. For him, a Launch education was precisely a means to navigate toward a future beyond township space.

*I was running away from the influences of the township. They have a whole lot of history to them with apartheid legacies, so we can’t just paint a picture of the township as a bad place, but internally I was fighting so that I don’t become the typical you know “township youth” who somewhat makes it and then comes back and is subjected to the same realities. Through education, I ensure that I stay out of the township as much as I can because I don’t believe in the township as being my home and where I must find identity. I know and acknowledge that it has raised me but we’re there because of circumstances, so I can’t find an identity in the township. There’s other places I can stay here in the country. I can’t acknowledge things that were imposed upon us as Black people and then try to embrace that as a part of me. No. It just doesn’t make sense.*

Overall, across these debates, students, alumni, teachers, and families seemed to agree on one thing: the incredible difficulty of their attempts to navigate Cape Town’s enduring apartheid geography in transgressive ways toward alternative individual and collective futures—the spatialized work of aspiration. Students in particular spoke about the strain of the embodied experience of daily movement across entrenched borders for Black youth (Ndlovu 2020). The echoes in their experiences and accounts highlighted two major aspects of this strain: reconciling the “illusion” of spaces Launch granted them access to with the “reality” of their lives in the township, and navigating the fracturing impulse to “wear a personality” according to the space they were in. In one upsetting incident, Xolisa arrived at school crying, having just been robbed. She was blaming herself for forgetting about the “reality” and thinking she could listen to music on her headphones like she used to on her commute to school when it was in Pinelands. I heard
students speak about illusion versus reality on several occasions. Gesturing to spatial pedagogy, Awethu explained that one of the important lessons of the school relocation was actually reacquainting students with the reality that their peers were facing, since their previous daily trips into Pinelands had enabled them to escape into an illusion.

Students also spoke about how aspiration, the navigation of the fractured spaces of their city toward desired futures, leads to a fracturing of the self. They pointed to a Du Boisian “double consciousness” (2015). This fracturing has also been theorized in South African writer Es’kia Mphahlele’s (1974) assertion that “The dialogue between two selves never ends. The pendulum swings between revulsion and attraction, between the dreams and the reality of a living past and the aspirations, the imperatives of modern living…The two selves are apt by turns to fight, quarrel, despise each other, hug each other, concede each other’s roles” (41). Thandiwe illustrated this fracturing in her description of how engagements with privileged schools and attending school in Pinelands caused students to develop double personalities. She argued that

44 “You see now, you want to put yourself in a high standard when you are here (Langa). When you were there in Pinelands you did not see the life people are truly living in the township. Some people cannot study well at home because of things happening at the neighbor’s house, or because of things happening at your own home. Now because you are here in the township, you see and experience all those things. Now you also see people getting robbed. When we were at Pinelands we used the bus, and nothing would happen in the process of going to and from school using a bus. But now, you have to walk with the “Two-Series” walk, you see? From home to school, you see?”

45 “Two-Series” is the name of a maths and science textbook. Awethu is indicating here that when students are navigating township space, they have to walk with a purpose, and with vigilance, as opposed to with an unaware stroll. Instead of lollygagging, they have to go straight from home to school. This was a lesson that students had to re-learn, sometimes painfully, when the school relocated.
moving back into Langa grounded them in their material circumstances, ironically helping them
to aspire to futures beyond the township more effectively by accentuating the stakes:

*When you live in an illusion, it’s easy to get carried away because you mix with people
who are not of your status and when you are at school you get to be like them. You don’t
get to think about who you are, you conform to them to fit in. You think “We all go to a
Model C school, we all go to a school in a suburb, we all afford.” I’m not in a township
anymore. I’m not within the eye range of my peers in the township. Now they can’t see
me. It’s easier to act up you see? u-acta yabo? Like develop another personality
sometimes. Ewe, you up there—you believe you’re up there—but reality is you not. When
you’re here in a township reality, you get to see that, actually, “I don’t go to a Model C
school. I don’t afford. I’m here. This is where I am right now, so where I’ll work to now is
to get out of this situation.” So I feel like staying in the reality helps a person grow.*

Lingering on the unendingness of the “dialogue between two selves,” Mpumelelo struggled with
the discovery that, for Black youth from the township, the irreconcilability of illusion and reality
and imperative of “wearing” different personalities did not stop once he successfully navigated
his way through Launch to the presumed prize of an elite university education.

*It’s an issue I’ve been battling with. The case of identity and the crisis that comes with it.
Things collide and you have to try by all means to fuse the township life you’ve never
really lived and the life you are battling to understand. Putting it together is very difficult.
People don’t want to go home at university because they are too comfortable in that
space and going home implies going to a different reality. Going to a space where people
don’t accept you anymore. Not because of who you are or what you did but because of the
school you go to, because of the way you speak English, because you don’t do certain
things they do. I must try by all means to wear a personality that is suitable for that
space, whilst at the same time I know that many of the things make me uncomfortable.
The question becomes trying to find that identity and putting it together.*

Here, he points to the trade-offs of aspiration, revealing that the navigation of social space
toward some futures, is necessarily the navigation away from others, in ways that can be deeply
alienating for those who live their lives across “a world cut in two” (Fanon 2004, 38).

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46 You act (perform), you see?
2.4 Teaching to Transgress: “Going to Town”

South African scholar Pumla Dineo Gqola (2013) has argued, “Townships are a white supremacist construction, and although they have been shaped by vibrancy, defiance and counter-cultures, the time to claim the world beyond township borders has long been with us” (85). While school staff and leaders presented Launch’s move into the township as a type of spatial pedagogy that attempts to disrupt hierarchies of apartheid geography by countering the conflation of moving “up” with moving out of township communities, they were simultaneously invested in helping students take up Gqola’s call to claim the world beyond the township. This was illustrated by Launch’s inclusion of outings in their model that had the explicit purpose of encouraging youth to “claim space” in Cape Town areas historically closed off to them.

I opened this chapter with Grade 8 students boarding a bus on the first day of school on their way to “Claim Cape Town.” Launch initiates learners into the future-forging work of “conversion” described in Ms. Christine’s community meeting speech by way of a tour of carefully selected sites in the city’s Central Business District and affluent beachfronts. Students, alumni, and staff revealed that these sites are chosen because of their historically contested nature. They linked “going to town” to a larger project of “claiming space” that lies at the heart of the production of aspiration. The “Claiming Cape Town” trip is an annual ritual meant to introduce the youngest members of Launch’s student body into sites that are typically unfamiliar to them precisely because of the racist partitioning of the city’s geography, and to inculcate them into spatial practices that forge a disruptive relationship with their city’s enduring apartheid geography. When I asked learners what the purpose of the “Claiming Cape Town” trip was, their responses focused explicitly on its pedagogical nature. Nolubabalo, Grade 12 learner, explained:
The whole purpose of the Grade 8 outing is to introduce Grade 8s to the “Launch life.” And they take them as part of community, right? To teach them to take ownership of those spaces, the places of the White people, places Black people were formerly not allowed into, like Camps Bay and others. We are allowed to go there and we are entitled to them as much as White people are, we are as deserving to be in those spaces. They take us to places and you get to see that you have to dream big and that you are part of the big society, you know? For me, traveling is one of the biggest things I’ll never forget.”

This idea that the outing is meant to teach youth to “claim” and “take ownership” could be witnessed in the actions of Launch alumni who accompanied the learners on the 2018 trip. Through modeling and conversations, they encouraged learners to assert themselves in unfamiliar spaces and to seek resources they need to feel welcome. For example, in an initial stop at the South African Museum and Planetarium, learners were being escorted through an exhibit on the natural history of South Africa by a docent who was speaking English rapidly. When he paused for questions, they stared blankly and no hands went up. As he began to move on, Nombulelo, a Launch graduate who now teaches isiXhosa at the school, nudged a few of the kids, whispering to ask if they understood what was being said. They shook their heads. “So why don’t you say something?” she asked. She politely, but emphatically, interrupted the docent and explained, “Sir, we don’t understand, do you have someone who can do the tour in our language, isiXhosa?” While we waited for the docent to talk to his colleagues, the children milled about the exhibit and Nombulelo explained to me,

They were just going to sit here and keep quiet even though they didn’t understand most of what that guy was saying. You could tell from their faces. And he was going to keep going. At Launch we teach in English and of course their English will have to improve for matric, but they should still be able to ask for help when they need.
About ten minutes later, an older Black woman entered the exhibit and greeted the learners in isiXhosa. They responded in unison and she proceeded to lead a lively tour of the rest of the museum, acting things out, pausing to ask them questions, and to answer their many questions.

In another instance of practicing claiming and ownership, we walked through the Company’s Garden, an idyllic green space in the city center that attracts both tourists and locals. As the site where shipwrecked Europeans arrived and planted a garden for a refreshment station that later became a settlement, it reflects the complex juxtaposition of Cape Town’s colonial history and its renowned beauty. As we strolled through crowds, another alum, Khanyisa, asked if I noticed an older White couple snapping photos of our group without having asked. I looked to where she was pointing and noticed that indeed, they were not being the least bit subtle. She began dramatically snapping pictures of the couple with her phone. This visibly disturbed them and they hurried away. Several learners witnessed and laughed, but Khanyisa explained pointedly, “We have a right to walk through this park just like anyone else and we are not part of the attractions. If someone wants to take pictures of you, they must ask permission.”

Alumni perspectives revealed that the myriad outings have a lasting impact and that they are a central part of inculcating the aspirational politics of the school. Linking the outings to the “conversion” Ms. Christine described on the first day of school, Mpumelelo explained that he and his mother were initially attracted to the school because of the changes they saw in his older cousin. “He was not the same person he was when he started. So, when I wanted to go to Launch my mom was like ‘Of course, look at what it has made out of Dumi.’” He understood why, when he went to the school and “we went to museums, we went to privileged schools. I got to fly for the

47 The “Company” being the Dutch East India Company.
first time because of Launch.” Mpumelelo went on to explain why Launch’s outings and spatial pedagogy were core catalysts that initiated the “conversions” Mrs. Christine described.

The school you go to has an influence on how you see yourself in a space, how you think you’re deserving of being in that space and claiming it, and the things you think you are entitled to. I was part of a program in Grade 11 that brought together learners from schools around the province. Schools from the whole spectrum, your Bishops, Herschel, Rondebosch, SACS, Cape Academy [elite private schools or ex–Model C public schools], your Launch and COSAT [low-fee private schools], and also government schools from townships. We were all in one space. That’s when I saw that where you go to school impacts on how you see yourself in space in relation to other people, because people grouped themselves according to the caliber of schools. So you wouldn’t see people with the same uniform in the same corner like you would expect, you would see people with different uniforms. But then how you distinguish where they come from you would look at how they speak, the accent they use, the claiming of space, and how confident they are in the space when answering questions, asking questions, and making statements. Even when they ask “who’s gonna volunteer?” they run first those children from Herschel and those schools. So you go to these spaces, and I have been privileged to be exposed to many spaces, and initially I would always feel as if “I’m not supposed to be here but I’m lucky that I’m here. So I’ll just sit down and keep quiet and appreciate.” But as time went by, I was like “I’m deserving like anyone else,” so I started to claim space.

Mpumelelo’s description of how schools inculcate different relationships to space according to their “caliber,” different levels of confidence and entitlement in navigating it, vividly illustrates how geographies of domination can function as pedagogies of domination. His analysis echoes South African scholar Jenni Karlsson (2004), who argues that, during apartheid, “school space” is where South Africans “learnt to position themselves within the hierarchy of…society” (327). Being exposed to spaces beyond school and community premises, “where learners encountered their Other,”—a rare opportunity for youth in a context of regulated spatial hierarchy—“provided the conditions for poignant awakenings to racialised identifications within discriminatory hierarchies” (Karlsson 2004, 327). Mpumelolo illustrates that these dynamics are still at play in a postapartheid dispensation where spatial hierarchy and segregation persist. Importantly, his
pedagogical focus here is not a claim about “bad” teachers or “bad” parents, which often dominate analyses of schooling inequality, but about how the arrangement of space itself, and the different contexts in which young people attend school, can teach them “their place” in society. Having a rare opportunity to be in a shared space with students from across the school spectrum allowed Mpumelelo to observe peers engaging different relationships with space and initiated a “conversion” in his ability to “claim” it.

A particular stop on the “Claiming Cape Town” trip that alumni typically recalled vividly was the beach. Mpumelelo explains the significance of going to the beach,

\[\text{It had an impact on how I viewed the city because the city is very very different in different parts. One of the legacies of apartheid is that during the festive season people were only let home [from work] to enjoy themselves on the 26 of December which is called Boxing Day and on the 1st of January and the 16 of December. And Boxing Day was the only day I’d actually been to the beach. On that specific day all the beaches in Cape Town are filled. People think it’s the only time they can go to the beach. It’s a legacy of apartheid that we have internalized. So to go to the beach with those Launch trips on a random day of the year and go to different spots like Kirstenbosch Garden, it was nice to just exist in wealthy spaces we see from afar, or hear about at times, but being taken there to live and exist and just take in the different beautiful parts of Cape Town, it was nice.}\]

According to Mpumelelo, “people” think they can only enjoy Cape Town’s renowned beaches one day of the year. By “people,” he is referring specifically to Black people. There is particular significance to the days he mentions. The 16th is significant in both Afrikaner and Black liberation struggle tradition. It marks the day Voortrekkers\textsuperscript{48} defeated the Zulu army in their attempt to settle the interior of South Africa in 1838, but also marks the 1961 forming of

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\[\text{\textsuperscript{48}Voortrekkers were settlers of Dutch descent (later called Afrikaners) who took part in a mass migration into the interior of South Africa to escape British rule in the Cape Colony. They were driven by the myth of “empty lands” and caused much social upheaval for indigenous peoples in the process (South African History Online 2022b; Weaver-Hightower 2018).}\]

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uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK) (Spear of the Nation), the armed wing of the ANC (South African Government 2020). Having witnessed the indiscriminate massacring of scores of Black people during the height of nonviolent protest a year prior at Sharpeville, the ANC chose this day to formally shift to armed struggle. One of the acts of “rainbow nation” building during the transition was to declare this dually significant day a public holiday, Reconciliation Day. The 26th, Boxing Day, originates in a British holiday of giving gifts to the poor and letting servants off work to celebrate with their families (as they would have been serving employers on Christmas Day) and it is observed across former colonies in varying ways. In Cape Town it has been declared by many as “Black Beach Day” because thousands of Black people travel to the city’s coasts that day, many who do not often get to enjoy them (Krotz 2013; Lewis, Maditla and Dano 2013). For Mpumelelo, the present significance of both of these days is that Black people get “let home to enjoy themselves” from their jobs. They get to avail themselves of rare leisure. But traveling to the beach with Launch revealed that one could in fact go to the beach on any “random day of the year.” This discovery shifted Mpumelelo’s perception of his access to the city itself. As he says, the idea that he could simply “exist” in beautiful parts of Cape Town, and visit them any time he likes, was transformative.

Beaches are particularly contested spaces in Cape Town because of apartheid-era laws that segregated public premises including the sea and the sea-shore, allocating larger, more pristine, and more easily accessible beaches to South Africans classified as White (Rogerson 2017). These patterns of exclusion persist under new regimes of privatization. On December 26, 2018, Black Beach Day, tensions around access to Cape Town’s beaches flared up again and captured national and international headlines when a private security company drove Black
beachgoers off of Clifton 4th, a public beach. This ignited a series of protests under the social media banner #ReclaimClifton. Demonstrators, including many #RhodesMustFall activists, slaughtered a sheep on the beach describing it as a cleansing ritual calling on their ancestors to exorcize the spirit of racism from the beach (Nombembe 2018). In the aftermath of the protest, I was not surprised when a friend sent me a viral Twitter video of a Launch graduate at the demonstration making an impassioned speech about racism—still actively engaged in “claiming space” long after he had graduated.

When asked what she remembers about the first day of school trip, another alumna, Anathi, also mentioned the beach and the lasting impact of the outings in general.

_We were much more exposed to things than we would have been if we were going to the schools in townships. My sister goes to one now, and they never go on any outings. We went to the beach and we sang there. We were told to claim the space. For us Black kids in townships, going to the beach was not really a regular thing. I think they also knew that we might never have those experiences. I enjoy hiking now, but I probably wouldn’t have gone hiking if I didn’t start at Launch. Maybe I would have, but it wouldn’t be much of an appealing experience because it was introduced to us in community. It was an experience exposing us to things that we could possibly enjoy doing._

According to Anathi, Launch’s outings shift students’ relationships to a divided city in ways that allow them to continue moving through it transgressively after they graduate. An important point she makes, also mentioned earlier by a Grade 12 student and echoed in other participants’ accounts, is that they experience these transgressive outings “_in community._” For both Anathi and Nolubabalo, the work of “claiming” unfamiliar, exclusionary space in a racialized terrain was facilitated by traveling in numbers.
Figure 7: Launch students on the beach during a stop at Sea Point Promenade on the “Claiming Cape Town” trip.

Staff perspectives offer important insights into the aims of spatial pedagogy. According to teachers, these school outings teach learners (and teachers) about the social geography of their city. Mrs. Christine, who migrated from the DRC to Cape Town in the late 90s, explained, “When the kids leave Launch, they already know the geography of Cape Town—it opens your mind. Like myself, before I speak about learners, I have been so many places with Launch—Cape Point, Table Mountain, Robben Island—and it opened my mind.” Nobomi, an English teacher born in Cape Town to parents who were a principal and a teacher, explains that she has been exposed to several schools because of her own and her parents’ work, and affirms that the frequency of Launch’s outings is an anomaly. She went to a Model C school and explained that outings were not as frequent at her school either; she attributed it to an assumption that parents could expose their children to city sites independently from school since they were middle class.
She taught in government schools in another of Cape Town’s townships where she grew up, and the schools there did not have the resources for outings. She also describes Launch’s particular program of outings as intentionally designed to heighten students’ consciousness of the spatial politics of their city.

*It’s very interesting that they choose those places that they go, because sometimes it’s related to history, but sometimes it’s just to conscientize them about the area that they’re from—like for instance our first trip for Grade 8s, they go to town right? They go to Signal Hill, Lion’s Head, just so that they know about their environment and our context in relation to those areas.*

At Launch, the production of aspiration is accomplished in part through spatial pedagogy, which entails facilitating youth transgressions of boundaries, what bell hooks called, “teaching to transgress” (1994). Participants describe these spatial transgressions as imbued with educative meaning. Launch curates opportunities for young people to challenge their city’s enduring apartheid geography, and “claim space” as part of a larger program of pushing the boundaries of the possible.

A broader claim of this chapter is that scholarship focusing on aspiration must attend to its spatial dimensions, in South Africa and beyond. My conceptualization of "spatial pedagogy," informed by the perspectives and experiences of interlocutors, offers two insights to push how anthropologists of education theorize aspiration in uneven schooling landscapes. First, I expand research on the intersections between space, place, and pedagogy and this has the potential to contribute to a growing literature on critical geographies of education and childhood (Hunter 2020; Katz 2018, 2019; Nguyen, Cohen, and Huff 2017). Scholars have used the term “spatial pedagogy” variously to describe design and use of school spaces, movement of teachers and
learners within these spaces, or use of mapping technologies for pedagogical purposes (Lim, O’Halloran, and Podlasov 2012; Sinha et al. 2017). Literature on “pedagogies of place” decenters schools, focusing on historical, cultural, ecological, and political aspects of particular sites (Ellsworth 2004; Goulding 2017; Gruenewald 2003). Notable ethnographic scholarship approaches the school as an intersection in urban space where a number of social and historical processes that extend beyond the school collide, but this dynamic lens has been deployed toward sociospatial analysis of sites within the school building itself, such as hallways (Nespor 1997, Shange 2019). The distinct concept of spatial pedagogy I elaborate focuses on educative aspects of transgressive movement across contested urban spaces, and on the disruptive potential of these movements to expand imaginative geographies (Said 1978; Harvey 1973) of marginalized youth in a contested city, in turn producing new types of aspirations.

Second, my attention to the spatial aspects of aspiration at Launch points to the need for critical geographies of education to more deeply engage Black Geographies scholarship that illuminates both how hierarchical relations constrain aspirations of racialized subjects and the insurgent spatial practices they employ to challenge these arrangements (Hawthorne 2019; Lipsitz 2011; McKittrick 2006; McKittrick and Woods 2007; Ramphele 1993). As South African poet Keorapetse Kgositsile (2017) puts it, “places can have scars.” Achille Mbembe (2003) notes, “the township was a peculiar spatial institution scientifically planned for the purposes of control” (26) on the periphery of “the city,” which was conceptualized and planned as a “White” space. In the “Mother City” of Cape Town, this persists in the present because, as anthropologist Anne-Maria Makhulu (2015) points out, neoliberal restructuring followed a particular course that maintains uneven access and perpetuates racial capitalism. Yet, Black geographies scholarship
urges us to look not only at geographies of domination and exclusion, but also to the creative practices that resist and undo them (Hawthorne 2019).

Launch’s annual “going to town” is more than an extracurricular outing. It is a transgressive experience that challenges enduring apartheid geography and invites learners to stretch their imagined futures beyond its constraints. It maps onto more collective aspirations articulated as “the right to the city,” which according to David Harvey (2008), is “far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city.” Schools are ubiquitous forms of urban infrastructure that shape the movement of youth and families through fractured landscapes forged from complex histories. As Carla Shedd (2015) has argued in her work on Black youth mobility in the context of Chicago schooling,

Schools are one of the primary reasons young people traverse neighborhood boundaries, but they can also operate as the reason some adolescents remain cloistered within those boundaries…the particular ways in which adolescents navigate…physical and social geography have a significant influence on their beliefs about their individual and collective futures, as well as their prospects. (159–60)

Thus far in this chapter, I have illustrated the spatial aspects of aspiration through an exploration of how Launch students, alumni, teachers, and families navigate a fractured social space toward desired futures for themselves and their city, as well as the contradictions this navigation evokes. In the process, I have offered the concept of “spatial pedagogy” by tracing both how schools shape students’ movement through contested space and the pedagogical power of space itself.

2.5 (re)Claiming the City: Seeking Spatial and Racial Justice

Launch’s spatial pedagogy of “Claiming Cape Town,” while often transgressive, is not without contradiction. While some interrogated the dominant notion of moving “up” as moving “out” of township communities, others rejected the notion of “reclaiming” township space that
was constructed explicitly for purposes of racial domination. At the same time, there was consensus that it had long been “time to claim the world beyond township borders” (Gqola 2013, 85). As a selective school, Launch’s model risks further differentiating already uneven social space, by facilitating mobility and claiming of space for individual learners and families, while leaving structural conditions under-interrogated. But spatial pedagogy extends beyond schools. By turning to other educative contexts where it is at play, educators in schools and beyond might glean lessons for how it can be pushed beyond a focus on facilitating access on an uneven terrain toward building consciousness of and rewriting the terrain itself.

Outside of Launch, I was able to witness alternative approaches to spatial pedagogy at work in popular education and activist spaces, where it was employed to elucidate the structural underpinnings of Cape Town’s continued uneven development and move people to act collectively for redistributive change. For example, Reclaim the City is a spatial justice movement of tenants and workers advocating for desegregation and affordable housing in the inner city and campaigning against evictions that displace people from well-located, gentrifying areas to urban peripheries (Reclaim the City 2021).49 They take occupation of unused public buildings in Cape Town’s city center and transform them into social housing, in the process calling out the city’s selling of public land to private developers while neglecting the responsibility to develop affordable housing and redress the spatial legacies of apartheid.

For several months in 2018 I lived across the street from the Woodstock Hospital, a public hospital that was disused until it was occupied by seven hundred Reclaim the City members (now more) who turned it into Cissie Gool House, a residence named after an

49 Also see Ndifuna Ukwazi, a law center that advocates for access to well-located land and affordable housing for poor and working class families, communities and social movements. https://nu.org.za/
antiapartheid activist and first Black woman to serve on Cape Town’s City Council. RTC employed a form of public spatial pedagogy by staging creative protest actions that called attention to spatial injustice and state collusion with private developers. For example, they hosted an audit trip to Wolwerivier, a “relocation camp” the city had set up on the outskirts of Cape Town for people evicted from inner city areas, which was done solely to meet legal obligations to provide emergency housing. Through busing RTC members and members of the wider public to the barren site about 30 minutes’ drive outside of the city, and encouraging us to learn from residents about their experiences, they aimed to conscientize the public about the ways that relocating people to camps on the urban periphery—far from jobs, schools, and services, where they are compelled to pay exorbitant transport costs and travel long distances to access the city—reproduces apartheid legacies.

In another instance, RTC amplified the struggles of long-standing residents’ against evictions from Woodstock, a rapidly gentrifying area of Cape Town, by hosting a guerilla film screening in a neighborhood public park. They screened *Not in My Neighbourhood* (2018), Capetonian filmmaker Kurt Orderson’s documentary on the intergenerational struggles of people in the “so-called global cities” of Cape Town, New York, and São Paulo against spatial

50 Orderson’s rationale for including these cities, particularly Cape Town and New York, is illuminating. He states, “...both of these port cities were colonised by the Dutch. The Dutch arrived in New York in 1624, and they arrived in Cape Town in 1652. What is that linkage? What was happening? What was the Dutch East India Company doing? Slavery was unfolding. For me, that is a critical link between these two cities. But one also has to look at the social economic inequalities in New York City. Looking at global capital, who are the people who have faced the brunt of these inequalities? There’s a history of systematic intergenerational oppression. Through this lens, if Cape Town is using NYC as a reference . . . The same architects and urban planners were part of the “regeneration” process in Woodstock and Salt River, and also prior to the 2010 World Cup… There were all these parallels that I was seeing . . . I wanted to look at the flaws of this “global city,” dissect it and say, “You know, why is it that New York City doesn’t talk about that?” Everyday there’s over 70,000 homeless people who have to stay in shelters, right? And let’s look at the kinds of rent hikes and the “gentrification” process that has been unfolding—for many years now. Looking at those injustices—injustice to basic human rights—we can see that global capital has really spread its web. But then, obviously, where am I from? Cape Town. Cape Flats. And Cape Town will, unfortunately, perpetuate itself if it follows this template.” (Himmelman 2021, 119)
violence stretching from colonialism to contemporary gentrification (Himmelman 2021, 118).

The film probes the violence of profit-driven urban development under the guise of the “global city” banner, often applied to Cape Town (Lemanski 2007; Miraftab 2007). This action built on previous protest actions calling attention to displacement in Woodstock, including an RTC occupation of a new upscale market in 2016. In the act of gathering a crowd in the Bromwell Street park across from an eviction site to watch Orderson’s documentary projected on the side of a building, RTC placed a local struggle in the context of global struggles and linked it to the longue durée of resistance to racial capitalism. Orderson and displaced residents addressed the crowd after the screening. As we sat outside in the dim glow of streetlights on that warm February night debriefing the documentary, friends asked about my perspectives on the film’s New York scenes, where Orderson illuminated links between police violence and spatial violence by interviewing young Black New Yorkers about their experiences being stopped and frisked by the NYPD in gentrifying neighborhoods, and connected it to the accelerating private securitization of South African cities like Cape Town. In the film, Orderson is intentional about calling gentrification “spatial violence” because,

> The legacy of spatial violence is not like the discourse around gentrification. With spatial violence, we can draw parallels and say, “There’s been a chronological timeline of spatial violence,” whether we call it “colonisation,” whether we call it, “forced removals.” Spatial violence embodies all these moments of colonisation within a framework of also speaking specifically about these cities, their unique histories, while emphasising common threads. (Himmelman 2021, 123)

Finally, to call attention to the city’s December 2018 sale of public land in the Foreshore area of the city center to luxury housing developer Growthpoint Properties, RTC members erected a shack settlement on the plot in question and staged several days of teach-ins (Jones 2018). In a
joint statement with the Social Justice Coalition and other organizations, RTC declared, “Public land should never be sold in a housing crisis. And if it is, then the money should be used for basic services or affordable housing for poor and working class people” (Fokazi 2018).

Figure 8: A “shack settlement” erected by Reclaim the City members on public land in Cape Town’s Foreshore area in protest of the city selling it to private developer Growthpoint Properties. The last line of the national anthem—“In South Africa, Our Land!”—is painted on the shack pictured.

It was not until the friend that had invited me to all these actions, an activist with an RTC affiliate providing legal advocacy for occupations and campaigns, started engaging with me about my research that I realized RTC significantly framed their spatial justice work through a popular education lens. Importantly, popular education frames pedagogy as a collective and participatory process, where all are teachers and learners. Correctly sensing that I would learn a lot from a deeper engagement with popular educators in South Africa, she invited me to attend an international convening of the Popular Education Network, where she and comrades presented on how they adapted a model learned from anti-eviction activists in Barcelona into weekly legal
education gatherings called “advice assemblies” where “popular education [is] used to build consciousness around tenant and occupier rights and the systemic challenges that lead to evictions” (Pillay, Bezuidenhout, and Booi 2018).

RTC’s popular education goal of “building consciousness” is accomplished in part through spatial pedagogy—transgressive occupations of space. But, rather than pedagogies of aspiration, which focus transgressive moves primarily on bolstering people’s capacity to navigate uneven social space toward individual ends, RTC actions harness spatial pedagogy toward building people’s capacity to interrogate space, people’s capacity to ask critical questions about its political construction and how it might be arranged otherwise. RTC directs the broader aspiration of “claiming space,” which I have explored in this chapter through Launch, toward a rereading and a rewriting of the city for alternative collective futures beyond spatial apartheid.

In pointing to contexts beyond Launch, I aim to illuminate how the spatial pedagogy at play in the school and its core discourse of “claiming space” is part of a much broader spatial consciousness in the City of Cape Town and part of larger efforts to disrupt the city’s continued violent construction as a “White” space. Unequal schooling plays a role in reproducing uneven geographies and, as such, is an important focus of spatial justice efforts. But spatial pedagogy is also employed in spatial justice efforts beyond schools such as in movements for affordable housing, for service provision, for sanitation, and more. And, as the young Black people in the New York and São Paulo scenes of Orderson’s film attest, spatial pedagogy’s potential to disrupt uneven geographies is relevant across contexts. Overall, exploring spatial pedagogy reveals that education is both a site and a strategy of struggle and imagination in the ongoing quest to forge racially and spatially just futures.
Interlude: The Curriculum and the Code

When I first began working with teachers in South Africa, I was utterly confused by people at Launch and other schools I visited using the term “maths” instead of “math” to refer to that purportedly most universal of subjects across language and culture. Where was this “s” coming from? I had to know. Eventually I mustered the courage to ask Lukhanyo, my Tomorrow’s Leader mentor/mentee. He looked at me in disbelief and laughed, “What do you mean? It’s mathematics. It’s plural.” After mending my pride from this clear loss in a battle of the Englishes, I reflected on our exchange. In a sense, the meaning and distinctions between two maths is at the heart of Launch’s mission and participants’ claims about the school’s intervention in the South African educational landscape. These claims are inextricably linked to the apartheid policy of differentiated curricula to shape and restrict the aspirations of those classified as “Bantu.” Speaking to South Africa’s Parliament in 1954 in support of the Bantu Education Act, Henrik Verwoerd asked, “What is the use of teaching the Bantu child mathematics if it cannot use it in practice?...That is quite absurd” (Tabata 1960, 58). Instead, he argued, “The school must equip the Bantu to meet the demands which the economic life of South Africa will impose on him” (Harrison 1981, 191). During apartheid, Black students were systematically denied access to higher-level maths and science education in order to forge a laboring class.

The legacy of this policy lives on in the continued political significance of maths education, the lack of which is often regarded as a tool of oppression, and in the dearth of teachers qualified to teach maths and science in township schools, which limits students’ ability to access tertiary study and STEM careers. Additionally, maths education is often framed as a barometer for the state of the nation itself, maths being regarded as a “gateway subject”
impacting critical skills necessary for South Africa’s economic growth (Shay 2020). In 2018, “the
top 200 high schools in the country had more students in matric achieving distinctions in
Mathematics (80%+) than the remaining 6,600 combined. Put differently, 3% of South African
high schools produce more Mathematics distinctions than the remaining 97% put
together” (Spaull 2019). These trends remain racialized, as the majority of the schools in that
three percent are formerly White schools charging high fees. In township schools, students less
frequently take maths\textsuperscript{51}—required for many courses of university study, particularly those
yielding B.Sc. and B.Com. degrees (Bachelor of Science and Bachelor of Commerce)—either
because they are counseled out of it to ensure higher scores for themselves and the school or
because they are not available due to lack of qualified teachers (Pillay 2015). Instead of what
interlocutors often called “pure” or “complex” maths courses, which include theoretical
concepts in algebra, trigonometry, and calculus, students in township schools more frequently
take “maths literacy,” which focuses on practical application of numeracy in daily life. Due to
intense competition for university spots, students with mathematics and science passes are also
more likely to be admitted for non-mathematics-related higher education qualifications.

Providing STEM education for Black youth in South Africa is often framed as a justice
intervention. One of two core distinctions that Launch makes in its curriculum is requiring all
students to take maths and science through matric level. They link this directly to their overall
pedagogy of aspiration. The school manual states,

\textsuperscript{51} While beyond the scope of this dissertation, there’s room for deeper interrogation of the distinction of “pure” or
“complex” and the hierarchies of knowledge and ways of knowing it signals, especially given the complex
mathematics I regularly witnessed people doing while commuting in packed taxis, the complexity of which only
truly hit me when I ignorantly sat in the wrong taxi seat and audibly frustrated the driver and passengers when it was
time to do the accounting for which I was grossly unequipped.
We strive to activate a solid work ethic and to encourage high aspirations in all our students. Historically, black students were precluded from studying maths and science beyond a certain level in order to develop a serving class on racial lines. As a step to reversing this social engineering of apartheid, the choice of maths and science as matric subjects is compulsory for all Launch students. We continually work together towards the building of students’ awareness of possibility and the development of their latent qualities and skills.

When asked why Launch exists in the first place, Ayanda, one of the top-performing matric students, told me, “Coming from the history we have, [Launch] is proof that Black kids are able to do math and science, as well. If you go to a former Model C school, maybe you wouldn’t be able to cope there because of the language differences and such stuff, but within Launch we prove that we are able to do math and science without any problem.” Yet, it is important to note the manual’s framing of maths and science as a “compulsory” choice. Some students were ambivalent and even antagonistic to the maths and science requirement, especially those who challenged the association of STEM with intelligence and aspired to arts or humanities careers that were not as enthusiastically encouraged. As Thandiwe shared,

We didn’t really care that it was a science and maths school. All that mattered was that it’s a good school. It had to be better than the other high schools in Langa. For someone like me, I would have appreciated art and craft. Not that I was not smart, but because it brings my personality out in an unapologetic way, allowing me to shine and be myself in my own merit.

52 Perceived proficiency in a particular register of English deemed “standard” (including character of one’s accent) functions as a marker of intelligence in some South African contexts. Ayanda points here to how debates on maths and science are inextricably tied to the politics of language. The persistence of language hierarchies is often cited as a barrier to Black youths’ academic success, given that children usually learn in their mother tongue through Grade 3, while the matric exam can only be written in English or Afrikaans. The Department of Basic Education is currently piloting an option to provide mother tongue matric exam papers (Sobuwa 2021). In the “Model C” schools Ayanda mentions, “learners are often expected to assimilate to ethnolinguistic repertoires of whiteness” (Christie and McKinney 2017). While Launch also emphasizes learning English, unlike Model C schools, students’ and teachers’ use of their full linguistic repertoires for learning is encouraged, and the majority of teachers are multilingual. Still, as a selective school, the “diagnostic” English and Maths tests that Launch administers to applicants inevitably function as a screen, even if to a lesser degree. The larger debates on language echoed in my daily experience. In one instance I accompanied Grade 9 students to a Youth Day event hosted by a youth organizer at Langa’s Old Post Office. After watching a short film called Sink or Swim: Navigating Language in the Classroom (Westcott 2004), which features extensive interviews of mother tongue language advocate Neville Alexander, students from several schools participated in a dialogue about their experiences.
“Share as much as possible.” These words encapsulate the other distinction of Launch’s curriculum. When these words initially jumped out at me from an attractive student-designed poster on a classroom wall in Cape Town, my experience teaching in US schools with slogans like “Be nice” and “Give back to others” led me to assume I knew both what they meant and what they represented. My assumptions were wrong. Or at least, incomplete. There was more to the story. Over the course of traveling to all of Launch’s campuses, seeing these words painted and markered onto a range of surfaces, hearing students and teachers invoke them in various contexts, and discussing them in classrooms, staffrooms, community meanings, and outings, I would come to learn how they reflect Launch’s unique approach to Life Orientation that centers on therapeutic notions of voicing and confrontation.

Focused on the study of the self in society, Life Orientation is a compulsory subject introduced in 1997 as part of a national curriculum for a new South Africa on the heels of the democratic transition. Its often neglected and undervalued status in schools across the spectrum has led to a 2018 announcement that the Department of Basic Education will soon scrap it, but Launch’s model includes double the required time for the course and uses it as a venue for daily LO circles, where students and teachers “work through their real-life experiences to build trusting relationships and promote insight into self and others” (Launch Manual). While LO circle reflects broader global trends towards an emphasis on what has variously been called social-emotional learning, non-cognitive skills, and character education as poverty interventions (Camfield 2015), the character of Launch’s approach reflects a particular understanding of “healing as speaking” that resonated with South African transition discourses still salient at the
time of Launch’s 2004 inception. Launch’s unique approach to the Life Orientation curriculum reflects what was sometimes described as the school’s emphasis on a “relational framework.”

Another key aspect of this relational framework is the Launch Code of Conduct, a shared creation from the first group of staff and students. Some of the code’s exhortations, like “Never give up,” resonate with an increasing global fixation on preparing marginalized youth to exercise “grit” no matter the odds (Duckworth 2017; Wills and Hofmeyr 2019; Hofmeyr 2021) “Grit” has been critiqued for rehashing racially coded bootstrap narratives of hard work and individual responsibility as the sole levers of “success,” while evading a structural analysis of inequality (Camfield 2015; Love 2019). But other expectations in Launch’s code stood out to me as potentially radical invitations, especially once I saw them in action—most notably, “Confront issues.” I was struck by the celebration of confrontation in a school environment. When I surveyed students and alumni, most of the responses to the question “What is the most important thing you learned at launch?” made connections to Life Orientation or the Code of Conduct, and specifically to the power of confrontation.

While codes of conduct are basic features across schools and the South African Schools Act requires them for public schools, they are typically separated between a student and a teacher version and articulated in terms of behavioral infractions and their consequences. At Launch, all students and teachers sign the same positively-framed code. The shared nature of the code of conduct and the tenets that promote youth voices are framed as intervening against the legacy of the Christian National Education ideology, rooted in a Calvinist interpretation of Christianity, which permeated apartheid education across racial groups in the context of the National Party’s conservative Afrikaner nationalism. Christian National Education placed emphasis on notions of
discipline and authority (along lines of race, gender, age, and “ability”) that shaped both content and methods of teaching. In her work on how “school space” taught South Africans how to position themselves within the hierarchy of apartheid society, Jenni Karlsson (2004) explains,

In that conception of knowledge and society, childhood was characterised as a deficient condition requiring adult guidance. This rendered the teacher as an authority and authoritarian figure tasked to mould children according to the values and traditions of their adult community (Ashley, 1989). Another important foundational concept of CNE was volk, the Afrikaans term meaning people or nation. This concept was used as the organising logic for different school systems based on language, culture and race (Norval, 1996). When applied to Afrikaners, volk implied a white supremacist religious duty as the caretaker and all-knowing guide over other volk, in a similar arrangement to the adult/child power and knowledge relation. (328)

By contrast, there was an emphasis on student agency and voice in the learning process at Launch, captured in the school manual’s assertion that “We believe that our students are not at Launch to ‘receive’ an education as passive receptors or vessels.”

“Leadership” is also a core component of Launch’s curriculum and code, emphasized in the school’s motto of “Educating Tomorrow’s Leaders,” but Launch interlocutors explicitly distinguished their conception from the hierarchical culture of leadership common to elite South African schools established under British colonialism. This hierarchical leadership is evident, for example, in the persistent prestige of the prefect system imported to colonial schools across the globe. The prefect system designates student leaders expected to uphold a school’s values and code of conduct and take on sometimes considerable monitoring responsibilities over other students. In South Africa, prefects are often referred to as “head boy” or “head girl,” and I came to understand the position’s prestige through casual accounts from friends who had attended elite schools. Grade 12 students were the first to call my attention to Launch’s emphasis on acephalous student leadership when we listened to and read Nelson Mandela’s memorable
account of a dilemma he faced as a prefect at Healdtown missionary school in *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994). As we reflected, they explained that every Launch student will at some point have to help lead a community meeting and any student can be called on at any time to host visitors or serve as an ambassador for the school. This was captured in a *Mail & Guardian* profile on Launch by a reporter who described asking his student hosts “*Are you the head girls?*” to which they responded, “*No. We are all leaders here. Shall we begin the tour?*”

According to teachers, students, and school documents, Launch’s model aims to challenge and redress both the official curriculum of apartheid through providing maths and science instruction to Black youth from township communities, as well as the “hidden” curriculum of authoritarianism and segregation inherited from colonialism and apartheid through Life Orientation circles and a shared Code of Conduct. They perceived these aims as working together, asserting in the manual that “*cognitive and emotional development are parallel.*” The Life Orientation emphasis on voice and emotional processing was seen as central to aspiration and academic achievement, particularly in relation to helping students build the confidence to contend with racialized and gendered perceptions of maths and science mastery as inaccessible. According to Siphiwe, alumna, principal, and accounting teacher at the Langa school, experienced maths and science teachers willing to teach in township schools were in high demand in South Africa, and Launch had had ups and downs in their attempts to recruit teachers who were open to expectations of participating in LO circles and breaking down conventional lines of classroom authority. Some felt this lent itself only to humanities and they all dealt with the pressure of the national curriculum’s matric exam emphasis. But Siphiwe was hopeful that alumni who were now teachers at Launch and elsewhere were changing this culture, while still
achieving high results. Luthando, Maths and LO teacher and Tomorrow’s Leaders alumnus,
indicates that this vision is being realized.

At first I didn’t understand why we had to do all that personal development work at
Launch—until I started teaching. I think it’s easy to just learn your subject and the
content and how to deliver it, but connecting with the kids is the most difficult part and if
you don’t, then whatever knowledge you have will be difficult to share. I thought it was
just about being really good at the subjects you teach, but I’ve learned it’s not only about
that. 60–75% of the time, the work that you do in the classroom is more personal than
subject wise, especially if you want the kids to engage. Even when kids are not
participating it’s not because they don’t want to, but because something else is
happening. Teaching is way tougher than I thought it was. It requires a lot of energy and
personal work every day.
**The Launch Code of Conduct**

Be kind  
Be honest  
Be healthy  
Be punctual  
Look good  
Work hard  
Never give up  
Admit mistakes  
Learn from mistakes  
Confront issues  
Be open to change  
Work together  
Share as much as possible  
Care for our world

**The Launch Learning Way**

Take responsibility for learning  
Develop goals and work routines  
Find motivation  
Practice and persevere  
Solve problems together  
Respect the ideas of others  
Ask questions—take risks  
Always use imagination  
Read and write daily  
Use technology to explore and create  
Be ready to learn anywhere, any time  
Learn with mind, heart, body and soul

Figure 9: Launch Code of Conduct maxims—“Share as much as possible” and “Admit mistakes”—painted on school surfaces.

Figure 10: Launch Code of Conduct maxims—“Be honest”, “Look good”, and “Find motivation”—painted on school surfaces.
Chapter 3: Breath Work: Trauma-Informed Pedagogy and the Capacity to Aspire

“Not everyone can afford to breathe for a living.”
—Koleka Putuma, Collective Amnesia (2017)

“What are the words and forms for the ways we must continue to think and imagine laterally, across a series of relations in the hold, in the multiple Black everydays of the wake? The word that I arrived at for such imagining and for keeping and putting breath back in the Black body in hostile weather is aspiration (and aspiration is violent and life-saving).
—Christina Sharpe, In the Wake (2016)

When I arrived at Babalwa’s Life Orientation class I was out of breath. It was the end of the daily morning break and, despite the roar of students chatting, playing, and snacking with no palpable supervision or bells, a familiar hush had overtaken the premises as fourth period crept near. Students quickened their paces along the double story open brick corridors. I could feel the changing rhythm of the school year—this was the Friday before the weeklong October holiday that would usher in the anxiety of 2018’s final term and the high-stakes matric exam. From my perch in the courtyard under the spring sun, I had been fully engrossed in watching Grade 8s in an intense match of Drie Stokkies when I realized I had lost track of time. As I rushed past them, a student soared through the air in a final squeezed-in leap, met with approving shouts from onlookers before his friends pulled him toward class.

I was relieved to see Babalwa was not there yet when I made it to the classroom, almost five minutes late. Since this was a group of matrics, they were already rearranging the chairs into a circle to start. A few greeted me and continued what they were doing. By now, I was a fixture, observing classes and facilitating research discussions. I had met most of them during my first

53 Afrikaans for “Three Sticks,” a popular game indigenous to South Africa. It involves competitive rounds of running and leaping through spaces between three sticks without touching them, with only one step between each.
visit to Launch in 2014, when they were Grade 8s. Thembisa, who always commanded her peers’ respect, volunteered to lead us in a breathing exercise. She waited for everyone to be seated. Softening and slowing her voice, she began guiding us with short, clear prompts, letting space linger between each. “Place your hands on your lap. When you’re ready, close your eyes. Feel your feet on the ground. Feel your back on your chair. Relax your shoulders. Take a deep breath in. 1...2...3. Hold. Exhale. 3...2...1.”

With my eyes closed, the release from our synchronized exhales mingled with a breeze from the open windows, now amplified by our silence and stillness. After a few rounds, we heard Babalwa walk in and take the seat her students had left. Thembisa went on a bit longer, seemingly for her teacher’s benefit, varying prompts and offering a few unguided rounds before inviting us to open our eyes.

“Molweni bafundi. Enkosi.” Babalwa greeted students and thanked them for starting.

She was met with a wave of greetings: “Molo, miss.”

“Sorry I was late. You all know I’ve been handling family matters. I had to take a call.”

“Yes, miss, how are you?” a student asked.

“Things are difficult, but I’m making sure to care for myself whilst I’m caring for everyone, the struggle many of the oldest siblings here have also reflected.”

Babalwa paused and looked around the circle, signaling the opening of a dialogue.

“When you bury something, how do you know if it’s trash or treasure?” She let a long silence hang for students to digest the question. “Each of us has hidden treasures, but sometimes we also bury things because of shame or fear. What happens if you carry hidden trash around?” Students chuckled. A few responded that it smells. “Ewe! Eventually there’s a stench. I’ve been thinking
about the difference between sacred and secret. Even me, it’s not always so clear. How do you
know if you are burying trash that should be taken out, that will create more problems if you hold
it in, or if something is treasure, that you keep close because it’s sacred?” Thulani, whose voice I
rarely heard, but whose skilled doodles often caught my eye, responded first.

_When I first came here, I thought most people were from Cape Town. I knew people from
Eastern Cape or outside Cape Town are treated differently by Cape Borners._ 54 I didn’t
want people to know where I stay since some kids live in proper houses or in fancy ones
like Settlers. 55 I didn’t have friends. But after listening I learned most people in my class
were from the Eastern Cape. They understand the deep rural areas and why we would
come here and deal with life in a squatter camp just for schools. At first I was hiding to
protect myself, but it hurt me more, until I realized I could open up.

Thandiwé, who was born in Cape Town and resided in one of the “proper houses”
Thulani referenced, spoke about an experience shared by many across these divides: grieving a
parent. “The death of my mom was so sudden and unexpected. I had to grow up very fast. I had
to play the mother role to my siblings and I still needed guidance and mother love, but I had to
learn a lot of things by myself. I buried the pain and anger at first. And carried it around. My
marks dropped. That’s one way I knew I needed to let it out.”

54 This references longstanding divisions between township residents born in Cape Town and migrants from rural
areas, referred to disparagingly as amagoduka, isiXhosa for “those who return home” (April 2016; de Satgé and
Watson 2018; Wilson and Mafeje 1963). Apartheid spatial planning structured these divisions through housing
migrant workers in barracks while granting longterm African urban residents access to houses (Mafeje 2008, 92).
Divisions associated with migration status are still shaped by structural racism, given the uneven development
between rural and urban areas that is inherited from colonialism and apartheid. In 2012, Western Cape Premier
Helen Zille referred to people who move from the Eastern to Western Cape for schools as “education refugees”
burdening the province, recalling apartheid laws and mentality that positioned Black South Africans as noncitizens
without rights of free movement (Qoni 2016).

55 Settlers is a better-off area of Langa township that has had contentious relations with residents of neighboring
informal settlements. It was planned in the 1980s as part of efforts to promote a propertied Black middle class that
would presumably deflect more radical agendas. Black professionals who took loans to buy homes on the buffer
strip that separated the township from the N2 highway saw their property values drop when shacks proliferated
during the early 90s transition. Along with redlining of the area by financial institutions, this caused a crisis for
homeowners, creating enduring social tensions (de Satgé and Watson 2018, 147).
Xolisa returned to Babalwa’s prompt: “It’s not always easy to know the difference. Relationships is one of those difficult spaces. There are things you keep between you because of love and respect, but there are things you might keep hidden that are unhealthy.”

Her classmate Ayanda echoed her. “I get you. Sometimes it takes long to realize something isn’t love, but abuse.”

Over the remainder of the period, students offered a range of testimonies and reflections. It was clear they had shared intimate experiences over their five years at Launch. Babalwa eventually brought things to a close:

Over the break, keep reflecting on how you know when you need to let something out. If it’s not me or a teacher you feel comfortable speaking to, maybe it’s a classmate or someone else you trust. Exams will be stressful. It will be easy to think LO isn’t important, but it will be even more. Imagine carrying trash into the exam and trying to focus with it buried inside. Share as much as possible.56

Although Babalwa, who graduated in Launch’s first matric class and earned a Bachelors of Education with the first Tomorrow’s Leaders cohort, is now a passionate Life Orientation teacher, when we sat together in the empty courtyard after school she confessed that it was initially the part of the school’s model she disliked most. She refused to speak for the entire first two years. Her LO teacher, a therapist turned educator affectionately called “Mama Farza” by students, incorporated mindfulness techniques like guided breathing exercises as well as group therapy approaches adapted from her own previous work in a clinical setting serving youth struggling with addiction, approaches that drew on dialectical behavior therapy (DBT). “One

56 During my research I participated in LO sessions where traumatic experiences were disclosed. Lingering on Saidiya Hartman’s (1997) description of the “uncertain line between witness and spectator” and the exploitative “invocation of the shocking and terrible” (4), I have chosen not to recount most of them here and instead offer a few composite snapshots. In the few instances where I relay details of experiences that people described as traumatic, they are drawn from one-on-one interviews, but all names are pseudonyms. While interviews were recorded and participants were reminded of this when disclosing experiences in that context, I refrained from recording or writing notes in LO, which is typically open to visitors on an invitation basis by teachers and students to preserve the space.
thing I didn’t like—she would make us breathe. And she would call it dialectics. So she would say
we must breathe and the aim for that was so we can focus on what was going on with ourselves.
Then after we’d share how we’re feeling.” Babalwa was initially skeptical. “In the beginning,
nothing was happening for me. Some people would cry, share deep stories, talk about how much
better they felt, so I thought they were lying because I was like, you can just do that at home. So I
would just breathe, nothing would happen.” Later, she did start trying it at home. Her teacher
offered mindfulness exercises that could be done privately, for students uncomfortable sharing in
the group. Babalwa’s reluctance shifted the more she practiced, and the more she noticed peers
sharing familiar adversities and experiencing relief from exploring them with peers.

I started seeing how my classmates and my friends were changing from just participating
and sharing and how relieved they would be. Then you would see that, ok, you are not the
only one going through this or you’re not the only one who has gone through that. I
started seeing how it works and also trusting Mama Farza and trusting my classmates.

She describes her gradual opening up in the space as a liberatory experience. “It’s only
towards the beginning of Grade 11 when I started working in the life orientation classroom.
That’s when it started working for me. At Launch that’s when I got to really feel and speak the
things that I was not allowing myself to feel. And because of that I was able to be free.”

The key LO components highlighted in Babalwa’s opening lesson and reflection,
“breath” and “voice,” were framed at Launch as both trauma interventions and means of
inculcating aspiration through “building students’ awareness of possibility” (Launch Manual).
Over the course of my research, I would come to learn that realization of the shared nature of
trauma-inducing adversities was a common turning point for students in Launch’s Life
Orientation classrooms. While realization of the collectivity of their circumstances unlocked a
freedom to feel and speak, it also raised difficult questions about why these experiences were so commonplace for the school’s Black students and teachers—questions some felt were under-explored at Launch. In this chapter, I outline Launch’s unique approach to Life Orientation (LO), a compulsory subject introduced to the national curriculum in 1997 to teach skills and values for a “new” South Africa in the wake of both the democratic transition and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s (TRC) widespread narratives on collective trauma and healing. I explore the potential and limits of the school’s LO model, and use it to think more broadly about how trauma is conceptualized in trauma-informed pedagogies across contexts. While such pedagogies largely position “trauma” as event-based phenomena generated from past experiences of interpersonal violence in intimate, domestic, or community contexts, I argue that they decenter the ongoing, everyday structural violence of racialized poverty itself: the mundane trauma induced by circumstances of inequality inherent to racial capitalism, including grossly unequal schooling.

In this chapter, I illustrate how breath work and activation of voice are cast at Launch as trauma-informed practices that will increase Black youth’s “capacity to aspire” (Appadurai 2013), despite their navigating contexts of continuous traumatic stress that render aspiration both “violent and life-saving” (Sharpe 2016). I begin by detailing the development of Launch’s model of “life orientation circle,” adapted from clinical DBT group therapy to fulfill a mission of “social transformation through personal transformation.” In the following two sections, I explore students’ and educators’ experiences of LO, and their assertions that addressing trauma through emotional processing and cathartic sharing enhances students’ ability to feel and speak, thereby enabling greater regulation and resilience, which clears the path to achievement, social
mobility, and community change. Then, I engage questions about the limits of liberal progressive pedagogies within contexts of ongoing structural violence that reproduce trauma unevenly. Probing the multiple registers of “aspiration,” I finally return to “breath work” conceptually to argue that a key limitation of Launch’s approach is that it focuses on enhancing young people’s capacity to aspire toward a vision of social transformation understood as a byproduct of social mobility on the part of individual “agents of change.” I contrast this with a latent, relational potential in the model that is more intentionally centered in political education spaces: activating a capacity to “conspire” toward collective visions of radical transformation. The latter requires inviting youth to unveil and process the structural roots of ongoing violence, not simply their affective experiences of it. This exploration is timely given debates sparked by the Department of Basic Education’s 2018 announcement of a five-year phasing out of LO from the national Further Education and Training curriculum, and LO’s replacement with compulsory courses in history, which is currently an elective. It also has global resonance as calls for trauma-sensitive pedagogy continue to grow across contexts.

3.1 “Social Transformation Through Personal Transformation”: LO at Launch

I first learned of Launch’s unique approach to Life Orientation before I had ever been to South Africa, when Bulelani, then principal of Launch’s Langa school, visited my Newark, NJ school in 2011. He joined us in our faculty meeting, where my school’s principal introduced him and invited him to share his impressions. Most of my colleagues were shocked when Bulelani spent the majority of his time on constructive feedback. This was not the usual posture of visitors. My school was positioned as a national and potentially global leader in the growing

57 In South Africa, Further Education and Training Phase (FET) refers to grades 10-12, which are not compulsory.
education reform movement because of consistent “results” in a “high need” community. At the
time, it was gaining more attention because of the 2010 publication and bestseller status of *Teach
Like a Champion* (Lemov 2010), which highlighted its classrooms’ “no excuses” discipline
approaches. Bulelani expressed concern about the rigid sense of efficiency and the lack of
attention to students’ voices and humanity. While he was impressed with the students
academically, he asked, what space or time was reserved in the day for them to work through
their thoughts and feelings? He suggested practices from LO at Launch. His question stuck with
me, as a teacher who was deeply concerned about my school’s racialized emphasis on punitive
order, and who was grappling with what Savannah Shange (2019) has called the “late liberal
double bind: we work for institutions that we know are soaked in bias and inequity, even as those
same institutions have (more or less robust) commitments to ending bias and inequity” (93).

Three years later, as I was preparing to travel to South Africa for the first time in a
teacher exchange program, Launch leaders emailed readings and promotional videos to help
familiarize visitors with their mission. Included among them was a one-page overview of Life
Orientation, describing it as the school’s “*fundamental intervention strategy, and the most
obviously distinguishing aspect of the Launch way.*” It highlighted LO as the “*chief means to our
identified end goal of self-empowerment,*” described later as part of a broader goal of societal
transformation. The “*model is focused on positive transformation and development of the whole
person as the centre of a spiral of influence that expands to include the whole school, the whole
community and, ultimately, the whole country.*” The goal of “healing” was explicitly laid out.

We believe that we have all been emotionally, intellectually and spiritually compromised
by the enforced segregation of apartheid and colonialism and that we all suffer resulting
degrees of social brokenness and pain and a loss of personal empowerment. We therefore
view focused emotional and cognitive intervention as a necessity for our students and, in fact, for all at Launch. We believe such intervention will enable us all to heal and develop as whole, fulfilled human beings.

All the orientation materials focused on Launch or the larger context of contemporary South Africa except one—an article on “Living and Surviving In a Multiply Wounded Country” by Nicaraguan psychologist Martha Cabrera (2002)\textsuperscript{58}, which focused explicitly on trauma. While working on “emotional recovery” with Hurricane Mitch survivors in 1997, Cabrera found that, rather than focus on hurricane devastation, most people wanted to process their “inventory of wounds,” traumas from the country’s political history or domestic violence (2). This led her to characterize Nicaragua as “a multiply wounded, multiply traumatized, multiply mourning country” (1), a description frequently borrowed at Launch for South Africa. Cabrera argues that processing wounds is fundamentally educative: “working through personal trauma is nothing other than transforming it into wisdom for oneself and for others” (9).

Similarly, Launch’s founder and director Joseph insists, “There is no question that healing and education are related.” He decided from Launch’s 2004 inception that LO would be its hallmark. When I first visited in 2014, he told me that South Africa’s efforts to include “personal, social, emotional, and spiritual development of learners” as curricular goals positioned them as a global leader, especially for countries like the United States that also have “open wounds” from the past. By the time I sat down with him in June 2018 to learn the backstory of how Launch’s LO developed, the national tone on “healing” had shifted, given the growing reckoning with the reconciliatory terms of South Africa’s transition, most recently stoked by the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall student movements of 2015 and 2016.

\textsuperscript{58} Translated from the original title “Vivimos y Sobrevivimos en un País Multiduelos.”
Although the Minister of Basic Education had announced LO’s phasing out two weeks prior to our meeting, Joseph remained committed. “They are going to probably abandon it now, and it doesn’t matter, because we will continue.” This was echoed by other Launch educators at a national imbizo\textsuperscript{59} in Johannesburg with leaders of the network’s six schools, of which three were led by alumni. “That key element of Launch’s work is embedded in a journey of disillusionment for me around the inability of a school to hold space for its children and have difficult conversations with children.” In his previous work in privileged schools, Joseph repeatedly saw that students struggling with addiction were referred to a clinic in Cape Town’s southern suburbs. Upon returning, they contrasted the ability to speak and be heard at the clinic with their silencing at school. After resigning in 2002, he took 2003 as a planning and fundraising year and volunteered at the clinic. There he met and learned from therapists in the adolescent unit, several of whom eventually came to work at Launch.

\begin{quote}
I began to be very focused on what this language of healing was really about. I started to understand that the colonial education we sit with had detached us from each other, and I knew this from experience, but I was looking for some magic in the space and realized, all these people are doing is having conversations. They’re allowing the young person aged 17 addicted to heroin to speak to a young person aged 17 addicted to heroin and the magic is there, not in the facilitation, not in the power or fear of consequence, not in the rationalizing, not in any of that. It’s in the shared accountability for loving and caring enough to say I’m a reflection for you, I also do what you do and I do it for this reason, why do you do it? The longer I sat in process groups, the more it crystallized—this is a reactive space and it’s a privileged space, can’t we unlock this conversation proactively and for kids in poverty? That’s when it became clear that when we started the school, this process would be a part of it. There was no curriculum called ‘Life Orientation’ yet at that stage for Grade 10-12, but we started it.\textsuperscript{60}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{59} Imbizo is a word in Nguni languages that can be translated to “a meeting” or “assembly.”

\textsuperscript{60} The National Curriculum introduced LO to grades 10-12 in 2011. Previously it had been only in R-9.
Upon learning that Farza, one of the clinic’s founders, was resigning, he asked her to join Launch’s founding team to establish “proactive daily process groups” for students and teachers.

When compared to often overcrowded government schools in the townships it serves, Launch’s LO approach is facilitated by its contrasting conditions as a network of small, selective schools with low student:teacher ratios and an extended day. Launch schools typically have one or two classes per grade and cap them at twenty-five students, “allowing for a deeper sense of engagement which, in turn, facilitates the formulation of meaningful relationships” (Launch Manual). Additionally, while they comply with national curriculum guidelines, their timetable allows them to go beyond since they are able to allot 270 minutes per week for Life Orientation as opposed to the 120 minutes allocated by the Department of Basic Education. Yet, many at Launch insisted their LO model could be instructive for all, including under-resourced schools and privileged formerly White public and private schools that are centrally implicated in South Africa’s persisting structural violence. They also felt the model had potential to travel beyond South Africa. The key distinction is a daily fifty-minute period of “LO circle:” “All participants of a Launch LO class, including the teacher, meet in a circle of safety [that] allows for all present to engage with one another without hiding behind desks and books” (Launch Manual). LO circles are modeled on group therapy approaches and typically include two co-facilitators (an LO teacher with counseling credentials and a content teacher). Launch’s LO department is “staffed by health professionals who work through their own and their students’ real-life experiences to build trusting relationships and promote insight into self and others” (Launch Manual). As the manual details, “non-invasive techniques (such as directed breathing exercises)

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61 Government schools routinely have over fifty students in spaces not conducive to that volume. In one instance, I observed a class of over sixty students. Equal Education activists’ 2021 #NoSpaceForUs campaign focuses on this.
are used to heighten the five senses. These increase students’ awareness and help them to remain emotionally and cognitively present.” Voice is activated through dialogue, sometimes guided by explorations of particular questions, topics, or activities, and other times open-ended to allow for student-directed dialogue. “Our Life Orientation frameworks, our community meetings, and our leadership structures are all built around our intent of activating honest, courageous and consistent voices of and within peer groups at Launch.” Mindfulness and speaking in LO circle and community meetings are framed as practices that unblock trauma and unlock aspiration for the ostensibly linked outcomes of individual achievement and community change.

Older students and staff at Launch help create aspirations in younger students to become agents of change in their communities through their education...at least 40 Grade 12s graduate from each Launch school annually, 400 young role models in a single community over 10 years. We believe this could be a ‘tipping point’ in transforming the educational aspirations and economic reality of a single community.

As the Tomorrow’s Leaders program grows, LO departments across all of Launch’s campuses are increasingly staffed by alumni.

The LO circle approach was heavily influenced by the use of dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT) at the clinic where Joseph volunteered and Farza formerly worked. Informed by her traumatic experiences of involuntary institutionalization, American psychologist Marsha Linehan (1987) developed DBT from a blend of cognitive behavioral therapy and Buddhist meditative practices, with the specific goal of treating individuals who are suicidal or who engage in self-harm, substance abuse, or other self-destructive behaviors. DBT focuses on mindfulness, interpersonal effectiveness, emotional regulation, and distress tolerance (Dimeff and Linehan 2001; Linehan 2014). Joseph explained,

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62 Program that sponsors Launch alumni to earn teaching credentials while working at Launch with a mentor teacher.
At the clinic I was introduced to dialectical behavior therapy done worldwide. There’s a strong practitioner and theoretician in America, Marsha Linehan. She has broken down the dialectical approach to behavior management into little units of change working on the basis that impulsivity is the primary cause of negative behavior cycles. So the stick-back techniques of Life Orientation really get at how do you reduce impulsivity? You have to bring the head and the heart together, you have to get that overlap of rational mind and intuitive mind, to bring them into wise mind. That’s the dialectic. So if I can bring those two together through moments of mindfulness, through the ability to be reflective, the ability to hold a mirror for somebody else, then I can learn through that mirror and how they’re responding and better understand myself in the process.

“Learning with the head and the heart” and “being a mirror” were metaphors routinely invoked by teachers, students, and alumni. They roughly fit DBT’s cycle of observe, describe, participate. The premise is that people develop an observing, integrated self and gain nonjudgmental awareness of oft-repressed emotions (“the heart”) through sensory exercises, sharing, and witnessing, also reflected in Launch’s Code of Conduct dictums, “confront issues”, “be open and honest”, and “share as much as possible.” Presumably, this enables emotional regulation (“the head”) and ability to cope with distress without resorting to harmful impulses. The goal at Launch is “self empowerment”—a stable, regulated, resilient self primed for perseverant aspiring in unforgiving odds. According to Linehan (1987), DBT’s central “dialectic” is between acceptance and change. This is understood at the level of the individual, with mindfulness and distress tolerance facilitating “radical acceptance” of self and circumstances, and emotional regulation and interpersonal development supporting gradual behavior change. As with other behavioral approaches in Western psychology, its theory of change centers shifts in individual behavior as opposed to critical psychology’s concern with justice-oriented intervention on environments that mediate harmful behavior. In adapting this clinical approach into a “proactive” trauma-informed pedagogy for learners navigating stressors of poverty, Launch
attempts to push beyond the individual with their maxim “social transformation through personal transformation.” Yet the focus on a “self empowerment” of atomized “agents of change” risks normalizing oppressive circumstances and promoting individualized responsibility for addressing them. Given DBT’s development to treat suicidal ideation and self-harm, its creator pragmatically frames the entire approach as “getting through a crisis,” crisis understood as personal and event-based. But what if racial capitalism, its longue durée and its ongoingness, is the crisis? For this, perhaps her only relevant offering is, “If you can’t solve a crisis, survive it” (Linehan 2005).

3.2 “Allowing Myself to Feel”: Life Orientation Circle as Pedagogical Therapeutic

“At Launch that’s when I got to really feel and speak the things that I was not allowing myself to feel. And because of that I was able to be free.” Babalwa had shared this reflection after her lesson on that October afternoon, in the context of the discussion about her journey to and through Launch as both student and a teacher. As a 2007 graduate in the first 9-12 matric class and the eldest of four siblings—three of whom attended Launch, two of whom earned tertiary degrees and secured middle class employment, and one of whom matriculated in one of the province’s top universities but did not live to graduate—in many ways her story represents the promise and the limitations of Launch. She earned a Bachelor’s of Education through the Tomorrow’s Leaders program and has helped establish Launch schools in other parts of the country. She is one of several alumni featured on Mail & Guardian’s prestigious “200 Young South Africans” list,63 has led students to a 100% matric pass rate as previous school leader, and

63 An annual list highlighting influential South Africans under 35 who are advancing their communities, fields, and the country. Past honorees include Trevor Noah, Caster Semenya, and Julius Malema.
managed drives to ensure student access to internet, sanitary products, and meals during the COVID19 shutdowns.

At the same time Babalwa’s story illustrates how afterlives of colonialism and apartheid persist in enduring material inequity and reverberating trauma. Though she and her parents are from the former Transkei “homeland” in the province now known as the Eastern Cape, she was born in 1989 over a thousand kilometers away from home in Rustenberg, the center of South Africa’s platinum belt. Her mother made the journey so that her now estranged father, who worked in the mines, could witness her birth. This mining region has become a touchpoint of contemporary politics, as the 2012 slaying of thirty-four miners by state police on behalf of a British company during a strike epitomized the persistence of anti-Black violence under a Black democratic government and dealt a blow to the tenuous image of a “new” South Africa. Colonial and apartheid segregationism stripped Black citizenship in a white-ruled South Africa, controlling movement and restricting habitation outside of nominally independent rural homelands, while scattering Black families through the migrant labor system. Men were conscripted to work in mines, factories, and docks; they were accommodated in barracks style hostels and prohibited from taking up residence or bringing families, leaving women to shoulder the costs of social reproduction in rural areas (Wolpe 1972). The coercive displacement of these working conditions “reconfigured relations of care to endure the peculiarly apartheid form of racial capitalism,” resulting in a “prolonged spatial extension” of kinship (McIsaac 2020, 204) that continues to shape Black lives, with consequences for education, healthcare, and gender relations. Babalwa’s story points to “the many complicities between patriarchies” (Morris 2011, 408): how racial capitalist violence commingles with patriarchal violence in relation to people’s
gendered positions (Gqola 2007). Contextualizing her passion for teaching, Babalwa shared that her mother was married through abduction at age 14, interrupting her education.

When she married my dad, they were not dating. She went to the river, on her way back they took her, kidnapped her, and then her family was informed. They went, paid lobola and then they got married. So because it was a traditional wedding, when he started cheating, she couldn’t say “I want to divorce.” She told her brothers, and they were like “it happens to everyone, that’s not good enough for you to leave.” So she didn’t have a choice.\(^{64}\) That’s why she ran away to Cape Town. She went back to school and I remember, when I was doing Grade 2, we were in the same school. She was a senior, but she did not finish. So I think that’s why she pushed us in school because it’s something she really wanted, even for herself.

Babalwa lived in the Eastern Cape with her grandmother until age eight, when her mother’s work as a street vendor yielded enough to bring her children to Cape Town. Despite good marks, it never occurred to her that she would “do something” beyond Grade 12. “You just go to school because everyone goes to school and the rich ones will go to varsity,\(^{65}\) but generally, if you finish Grade 12, you either get a license to drive trucks or buses or do deliveries or you work in a call center or in a mall as a serviceperson or you just stick around the townships.” It wasn’t until Grade 11 when she began participating more in Life Orientation that she began to envision herself as an educator. Her LO teacher was always asking the students what they wanted to do, and the course included a job shadow. While her trip to an accounting firm was unappealing, it

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\(^{64}\) This practice is called ukuthwala, which refers to a range of ways to expedite a customary marriage, some consensual and romantic (similar to elopement) and others nonconsensual involving abduction and rape. Many maintain that coercion is a contemporary distortion, but recent scholarship argues that “the perception of violent ukuthwala as ‘new’ has concealed brutality against black women through the apartheid and colonial eras” (Karimakwenda 2021). Ukuthwala has always been heterogeneous and contested in communities. Karimakwenda (2020) argues that anxieties about reifying colonial and apartheid tropes of Black cultures as uncivilized and violent hinders nuanced reckoning with intracommunal and gendered violence. Furthermore, “under both colonialism and apartheid, patriarchy was written into law, leaving less room for negotiation and contestation at the level of the community, and rendering Black women even more vulnerable in the eyes of the law and within their communities” (2020). See also Mamdani’s Citizen and Subject (1996) which explores leveraging of “tradition” toward aims of colonial and apartheid statecraft.

\(^{65}\) This term is used colloquially in South Africa for “university.”

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did make her think about her interests. “At the time I was really involved with recruitment camps for incoming learners, so I thought I wanted to be a social worker. I enjoyed working with my peers or younger people from my township.” Her teacher suggested she might like teaching. She later joined the first Tomorrow’s Leaders cohort.

Like many Launch students, Babalwa described LO as a process of becoming aware of her feelings and expressing them, aided by her teachers’ guidance and her peers’ accounts and witnessing. Pedagogically, this was facilitated through several approaches. The first was guided breathing and other mindfulness exercises intended to help students heighten sensory awareness.

*With students like me who didn’t like breathing and didn’t speak, Farza was patient because she understood what she was doing. She would also give us other things that we could do that would help us get in touch with our feelings. Like she would say even if you are at home and you are making coffee, just take time. Try and be aware of everything. Like from the noise of the kettle, the taste of the sugar, the smell. Or if you are washing, just notice all the scars you have on your body, how you feel when the water touches you, how, like—everything.*

In a session with Grade 8s who were just getting introduced to LO circle, I observed Babalwa pass around hand cream and ask each student to take a dollop. Then, in silence, everyone, including Babalwa and I, gave themselves a three-minute hand massage. We were asked to take our time and notice the smells, sounds, touch, and other sensations the experience generated. Afterwards students shared their sensory observations, how the experience felt in their bodies, and their emotional responses. Babalwa asked follow up questions to help students get more precise. When a student shared, “It was nice,” she asked, “What was nice about it? Can you say more?” to which the student responded that the smell of vanilla was calming and the cream was thick so it required her to do a long massage that made her hands feel soft. Another student shared that it was “awkward.” When Babalwa asked, “What was awkward about it?” the student
explained that the sound of everyone applying cream was really loud since they were all silent and he usually moisturized at home before school so it felt awkward to do it in the classroom where his classmates could see him and he could see them. Babalwa was careful not to judge students’ experiences. She clarified for them that the exercise was simply about noticing. The work of noticing one’s feelings was considered foundational to a larger project of developing emotional awareness and sense of self, which could then be channeled into insight for self and others through dialogue. Beyond LO, the work of noticing was supported by a whole school emphasis on staff and students engaging openly and honestly about feelings. Babalwa explains,

At the beginning it frustrated me because it seemed like everyone wanted to be in your business. Every teacher you go to they would be asking “How are you? How are you feeling?” Then in LO you could talk about how your living circumstances affect you. You could talk about things that people usually protect. Even my friends didn’t know anything about me except that I’m Babalwa, I’m from Zone 20, blah blah. They didn’t know anything that happened before I moved to Cape Town. So in LO, we shared about those things. Before someone asks you “how do you feel?”, you don’t think about it. But when someone asks you, then you start thinking “How do I feel? How do I feel that my parents are no longer together? How do I feel about the fact that I was not with my parents for two years and it was not nice? How do I feel about the fact that I am staying in a shack?” In the beginning, you keep everything to yourself. If you are feeling insecure about it or ashamed or sad, it’s just with you. With LO you become aware of how you feel about things, where you stand, whereas before you just went along. Even if you don’t speak up, you become aware. It helped me understand that, ok this is my life, with all that has happened. And it was not up to me. I didn’t do anything that will result in me having to live with just my mother or living in a shack or living in Cape town. I changed from going to Launch compared to schools I was in before. I started talking more. Fighting for myself when there was a need. I started being involved in leadership. Before I would go to school, study, and go home. Teachers would be like “Come to school, keep quiet, take out your books, do classwork, and then test.” Done.

Students and alumni tied emotional awakening to increased responsibility, regulation, and resilience. One alumna quoted on Launch’s website, who eventually became a teacher and then a principal of one of the schools, explains, “The first time in my life that I was ever asked how I
feel was at Launch. I couldn’t answer because, for the first time, I had to stop surviving and start living. My life in the township was all about survival. At Launch, you are able to feel what you are feeling and take responsibility for it.” In one of several in-depth conversations with Mpumelelo, he explained how LO helped him navigate tertiary study in an alienating institution.

Being at university in a predominantly White town and trying to find myself with people from a whole different range of backgrounds, it was lonely and uncomfortable, but it was reassuring in the sense that I knew that my experiences at Launch prepared me. I have faced a lot of things that I never thought I would, but with the ability to always sit down, reflect, ask what my role in a problem is, what’s a possible solution for it, and dealing with my feelings when I have different challenges that come my way in any form. To actually sit back and think for myself “What am I doing? What am I not doing?” and deal with feelings that are making me uncomfortable right on. LO prepared me for that.

Another Launch graduate, Anathi, also commented on how LO contributed to her ability to self-regulate when she left her family and Launch to attend a Cape Town university, describing how the “observing self” fostered by LO circles helped her navigate party culture in a way that ensured she did not “lose” her self. Part of what helped her was maintaining ties to other Launch graduates, illustrating that the school’s “relational framework” extends past graduation.

For the first six months after I left Launch and went to varsity I didn’t want to familiarize myself with too many things and lose track. I just wanted to observe behaviors of people around me. And I feel like that was a good thing because one of my roommates got pregnant and the other one was in a relationship with a much older guy. It’s not a judgment, but I didn’t want that for myself. I wanted to observe because we were all hyped up for Long Street.66 If I had done it immediately maybe it would have turned out differently. I wanted to see where I stood in those things. When I started clubbing I was much more self-aware and I was doing it with other learners who went to Launch. It was a different experience for us because we’d go together and then it didn’t become a thing where you were losing yourself into the clubbing scene. That whole Life Orientation thing, the confrontations, it did a lot. It gave us a different perspective on how to deal with things because they’re bound to happen. I enjoy clubbing and drinking now and sometimes I do go overboard but not in a sense that I’m losing myself as a person. I had a lot of introspection to choose who I would be and what I wanted and didn’t want.

66 Popular nightlife area in Cape Town’s city center.
Beyond emotional awareness, another major approach to LO circle was facilitating dialogue and cathartic disclosure by posing open-ended questions similar to the one raised in the opening of this chapter. Some of these were designed to explore the particular values in the Launch Code of Conduct along a developmental trajectory from Grade 9-12. For example, with the value of “trust,” the sequence would progress as follows:

- Grade 9, focused on increasing knowledge, explores the question “What is trust?”
- Grade 10, focused on internalizing values and knowledge, explores “What does trust mean to you?”
- Grade 11, focused on applying values and knowledge, explores “How do you live trust?”
- Grade 12, focused on evaluating, explores “Is your lifestyle a trusting one?”

Over the course of my research, I would participate in sessions where students and teachers worked through questions like “How do you respond when people tell you things you don’t want to hear? How do you tell someone else something they don’t want to hear?” and “When do you wear a mask?” Another approach I noted in LO classes was leaving open space for student-directed dialogue grappling with issues particular learners were dealing with or conflicts that arose within the class between both students and teachers. For example, I sat in a Grade 9 session where students confronted a classmate about making bullying comments about another student’s sexuality, and a Grade 12 session where students raised concerns with a senior male captain on the debate team about maintaining healthy boundaries with Grade 8 girls on the team so as not to replicate patterns of older male predation that many students were painfully familiar with. Processually, there were a few protocols across these varying approaches to
sessions. While teachers typically asked probing questions and sometimes shared personal experiences, they co-facilitated discussions with, rather than for, students, especially as students progressed in age. While not all students spoke, the ones who did spoke freely without raising hands. Though sensitive experiences and feelings were routinely disclosed, sessions rarely had a neat culmination or immediate resolution of tensions or discomforts. Teachers frequently reminded students that one-on-one support was available if needed, but there was no symbolic gesture of closure. Breathing exercises typically opened sessions and the circle seating arrangement was always used, even when teachers covered official curriculum using the textbook. Because Launch had more than double the time allotment required by the government for LO, group issues always took priority over government-mandated curriculum. On several occasions I witnessed teachers scrap lesson plans to focus on “difficult conversations.”

Dialogues in the LO classroom invariably surfaced intimate experiences that evoked a range of emotions. In one session, Grade 10s explored the question “Who does your inner voice sound like?” This generated intensity because several students described their inner voices as sounding like the guiding voice of a family member, often a parent, that they no longer had physical access to, either because of distance or death. The teacher, Thabisa, a Launch graduate who had earned a bachelor's degree in social work, asked a question frequently used in Launch’s LO sessions to generate further discussion: “Who can relate?” This echoed Babalwa’s own experiences as a student: “If someone shares, then they [LO teachers] would ask, ‘who can identify?’ or ‘who relates?’ with whatever has been shared. Having people sharing that ‘Even

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67 The school facilitated support from health professionals in rare cases. I know of one student who, in consultation with him and his guardian, was connected with rehabilitation and counseling services. He was also connected with a partner organization that had a youth early intervention program focused on community reintegration for youth who experienced substance abuse or incarceration. I attended his graduation from this program.
me. At home it’s the same thing. It’s ok. This is how I manage,’ helped me feel comfortable with the situation that I thought was bad in a way.” Teachers and students called this key element, “being a mirror,” a sort of empathetic witnessing which involved both attentive listening and reflecting that validated peers’ feelings and diffused shame. As Launch LO departments are increasingly staffed by alumni, many students report that it was not only peer mirroring, but having teachers who shared similar experiences, that made them feel safe to share. Xolisa, one of Babalwa’s Grade 12 students, explained,

*I’m really grateful for LO classes. Usually you go to school, you just learn. Then go home. Sometimes you don’t even learn because there’s so much happening in your mind. So here it was really nice. At first it was difficult because you had to tell people about your problems and you were scared people were gonna laugh at you. But then when you actually did talk, you would find out that some people here actually relate to what you’re saying and they’re also facing the same things. That really helped a lot. And especially having teachers who understand, who’ve been through what you’re going through.*

In his research in a community-based organization that provides therapeutic support in isiXhosa in Cape Town’s Khayelitsha township, medical anthropologist Stephen McIsaac (2020) highlights how Black South African auxiliary therapists engaged a “political therapeutic” that destabilized Western psychology’s evasion of structural racisms, assumptions of the nuclear family structure as singularly productive of stable subjects, and expectations that mental health workers withhold their personal history and feelings. This form of what he calls “generational care” is more “adequate to the afterlives of a violent history, and the settler–colonial enterprise in particular, both in South Africa and elsewhere” (McIsaac 2020, 206). Generational care is oriented toward the relational ties between generations, as opposed to the treatment of individual psyches. It is “driven by the affective force of the therapists’ own history of struggle toward a different future for black youth, who continue to be marked by the legacies of colonialism and
apartheid” (192). McIsaac further argues that therapists’ explicit tying of mental health issues to the ways colonial and apartheid legacies are reproduced in the present made generational care “a political, rather than solely psychiatric, therapeutic” (205). Therapeutic encounters in that context were characterized not just by the disclosure of individual histories of trials and losses, but the “shared identification of a more collective experience” (203).

Such losses are not the contingencies of life, but the grounded, intimate, and lived effects of generations of precarious migrant labor, racialized dispossession, racism, economic and spatial exclusion, and [people’s] gendered and generational positioning therein. Seeing how a post-apartheid generation continues to suffer familiar losses—losses re-recognized, known-through-memory, from a different time—set the stage for a practice of care...a way of attempting to disrupt such familiar repetitions of loss for a new generation in the present. (203)

While this “shared identification of a more collective experience” was certainly at play in LO circles, it was alternatively harnessed toward what I will call a pedagogical therapeutic. This therapeutic identification of the collective nature of traumas helped students become conscious of, express, and validate their affective experiences, but was deployed as a pedagogical practice to clear their minds for unimpeded learning, increased regulation and responsibility, and aspiring. While this shared identification across peers and generations was powerful, it remained an open question whether its potential as a “political therapeutic” could be harnessed toward a larger project of conscientizing youth of the historical and ongoing structural causes of their shared predicament, situated as they are within the model of a low-fee private school founded in a White liberal humanitarian tradition (even as Launch intentionally staffed more alumni from the townships it serves).

During my research, I conducted a series of Grade 12 (un)focused groups (Franz 2011) that gradually and unintentionally took on the structure of LO circles. Students were very
comfortable convening around open-ended, in-depth conversations and the more I noticed them
taking over, the less I stepped in to facilitate. In one of these groups, the discussion came around
to how students thought their experience at Launch might affect them in the future. Thandiwe
spoke up, seeming to address her peers more than me,

*This space of LO and talking about our feelings is one of the most important parts of our
school. As much as we might sometimes think it’s like a waste of time just waking up and
discussing a person’s problems and feelings, in the long run that helps that person
because when you get to varsity you won’t have us to talk to, you won’t have that space to
offload your problems. If we didn’t talk about our problems now and get the advice that
we get now to try and make our situations better then we would have went into varsity
with all our baggage. Then at varsity, we would have got more problems and then it
would eventually become too much. That’s why you get people with depression at varsity
and some eventually kill themselves or turn to substance abuse. As much as it benefits us
now talking about our problems and feelings, I feel like when we’re outside this space it’s
when we’re gonna realize why we did this. When we’re out there, we won’t have as much
baggage, we will have left it here.*

Thandiwe’s description of LO as a means for students to evacuate their “baggage” in
preparation for a path of aspiring, particularly the additional psychic strain of a higher education
trajectory (or “failure” to access this trajectory), must be placed within a growing attention to
mental health issues and suicide in South Africa, particularly among adolescents.

This discussion happened near the end of the third term, on the precipice of the final quarter and the
high-stakes matric exams. This period is routinely characterized by news headlines cautioning
students against taking their lives amidst the stress of the season and, after results are released,
reports of those who have done so upon learning that their scores fell short of their desires. This
group also took place on the heels of a July 2018 high-profile suicide that dominated headlines—
that of Black academic and dean Dr. Bongani Malusi, the first Black person appointed as

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68 The Western Cape Government (2020; 2021) reports that 9% of all teenage deaths in South Africa are due to
suicide and numbers are rising. According to the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG), suicide is
the second leading and fastest growing cause of death among adolescents age 15-24 (IOL 2018).
professor and head of UCT’s Department of Medicine (Mnguni 2018). In 2019, UCT released a report highlighting “a constantly expressed view that the reason for black students leaving the university in body-bags due to high rates of suicide was...a racist institutional culture, unreasonable academic demands, and the alienating environment” (University of Cape Town 2019, 48). The report also references forms of “slow suicide” like substance abuse, particularly binge drinking, that are widespread across class contexts. It links all of this to visible and invisible structures of violence. Against this backdrop, trauma-informed pedagogies such as LO circle intervene not on these structures, but on individuals and their interiority, ostensibly fortifying them to withstand.

While myriad studies report student and teacher impressions of LO as useless, Launch students, teachers, alumni, and parents that I spoke with overwhelmingly expressed the opposite. When I returned to Cape Town in December 2017 to conduct fieldwork across the 2018 school year, one of the first things I did was explain the research to students. I shared the subquestion: how do students, teachers, alumni, and parents perceive Launch’s role in facilitating social mobility and social transformation as well as tensions between these aims? When I invited students to submit questions they would ask alumni if they were conducting this research, the most consistent response was to ask about LO. One student suggested I ask alumni “Do you miss LO?” Life orientation circle at Launch is approached as a pedagogical therapeutic that unlocks emotional awareness, expression, regulation, and resilience in order to facilitate aspiration. As the manual states, LO aims to “increase students’ resilience to difficult life circumstances and prepare them to lead responsible and self-fulfilled adult lives.” Xolisa puts it more eloquently: “Launch is a beautiful school, they open our hearts so we can shine in the world.”
3.3 “A Launch Student Has a Voice”: The Limits of Speaking as Healing

Beyond emotional awareness and catharsis, LO circle at Launch, as well as other structures like student-led community meetings and a competitive debate team, were understood to activate and amplify voice. Students, alumni, and even teachers described Launch as a place where they “found” their voice. In the Grade 12 (un)focused group described previously, Ayanda identified this as a key component of the school. “Finding your voice. I think that’s one of the important things about Launch. Being able to speak for yourself, being able to say your opinion and not be afraid of what people will say or how people will react. Being able to basically stand for yourself and say what you want to say. Loudly. And be heard.” The activation of voice was described as essential to the larger agenda of healing and encouraging Black youth aspiration in a “multiply wounded country.” Similar to the TRC discourse still resonant at the time of Launch’s 2004 founding, the school manual emphasizes that “healing is speaking” (Posel 2008, 138) to address what they describe as colonial and apartheid stripping of “personal empowerment.”

Launch’s focus on voice presents two major contradictions: competing codes of authority and discipline across social contexts, and the important distinction between voice and recognition.

Students, teachers, and parents invariably spoke about confronting understandings of authority and discipline in relation to age, race, and gender in order to embrace the concept of student voice. This reflection was shared across Launch’s relatively diverse staff of teachers from Black South African (predominantly isiXhosa-speaking backgrounds, as well as those who variously described themselves as Coloured, Indian, or Muslim), teachers from other parts of the continent like Zimbabwe and the Democratic Republic of Congo, white South Africans of British or Afrikaner background, and a few teachers from the United States who identified as Black or
White. In my work as a teacher educator, I spent time with one of the more senior teachers, Ms. Ntsika. By the time I was conducting research, she had transitioned to leading professional development programs at under-resourced government schools in the Eastern Cape, particularly focused on working with Black teachers over fifty who were trained in the apartheid system (according to her, they make up thirty percent of the teaching force). As someone who was experienced when she joined Launch’s staff in 2005, who served as a principal from 2007-2010, and whose career spanned the apartheid and postapartheid eras, her perspective is crucial.

Ms. Ntsika was born in 1961 on a farm between Gqeberha (formerly Port Elizabeth) and Makhanda (formerly Grahamstown) in the Eastern Cape province. It was part of the Cape’s colonial frontier zone where many wars were fought between indigenous groups, particularly the amaXhosa, and European settlers. Her community gained national attention for a controversial Land Claims case that made it to the Constitutional Court after the 1994 Restitution of Land Rights Act provided for compensation of those dispossessed during the 20th century. She shared that she had only one memory of seeing her father, when she was five years old; her mother was a domestic worker who lived in the home of her employers. Ms. Ntsika was celebrated as the first person in her family to earn a matric and study further to have a profession. As a Black woman on a restricted professional track in apartheid South Africa, at the time she completed matric “there was no choice, either you became a nurse or a teacher.” She earned a diploma from Cape College of Education in 1987 and led the languages department (Afrikaans, English, and isiXhosa) at a Black government high school in Grahamstown until 2005, when a teacher from a neighboring elite private school who knew Joseph put them in touch for a phone interview. Ms. Ntsika was ready for a fresh start, having just experienced a difficult divorce. The
interview questions were her first clue that Launch was a “different type of school.” Joseph had asked, “What would you do if a child comes into your classroom and is angry? What would you do if a child comes in and is hungry?” Part of her felt, “I’m there to teach,” but she knew what it was like to go to school hungry, and it made her wonder if she had done enough for her current students. She arranged a trip to Cape Town to visit before accepting the offer, in order to ensure that it wasn’t a “fly-by-night” school. Seeing that it was operating in a warehouse without conventional classrooms was concerning, but meeting the staff and students made her commit. She was considered to be one of the aforementioned “teachers who can relate.” As she recounted, her “journey at Launch was about contributing to the learners in that space that are from the same background that I was from.”

Ms. Ntsika described her professional and personal development at Launch, particularly with their LO approach and code of conduct, as life-changing, but also a huge learning curve.

*Launch changed things in my life for the better. I didn’t like it in the beginning because I had to do away with the thinking of corporal punishment, and punishment language. And deal with me now not being a perfect person just because I’m a teacher. Allowing children to dissect me as an adult in their space and my teaching methods. As much as I knew my content and produced good marks, what mattered in the space was how much do I give them an opportunity to be able to be THEM [raises voice] in the classroom?*

Corporal punishment is still commonplace, particularly in schools serving Black learners in poor communities, despite the fact that it was banned in the 1996 South African Schools Act (SASA). Contrary to widespread myths, it is not rooted in African cultures, but in colonialism and systems of punitive discipline associated with slavery, penal institutions, and missionary schools. Its use as a disciplinary tactic is exacerbated by conditions of overcrowding in schools serving Black

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69 This description is notable, given the boom in low-fee private school start-ups and regulatory issues in the sector. Independent schools are required by law to be registered by the government but there are many unregistered schools in basic and higher education that exploit communities (Hofmeyr and Lee 2004; Njilo 2020).
youth, and the living legacies of the missionary and Bantu Education systems in which elder teachers were trained. Ms. Ntsika links it to her own shaping as both student and teacher in schools with a racialized, Christian nationalist emphasis on order, cleanliness, and obedience. Pointing out parts of her body, she recalled that in her primary school days, “you will be beaten, five here, five here, and five like this. Such that you can’t even carry the pen and write in the next lesson.” Many students and teachers shared experiences of corporal punishment, some admitting they had felt it worked until Launch shifted their thinking. Xolisa, Grade 12, explained that Launch’s notions of confronting and voicing made her question the effectiveness of her previous school’s approach and see it as a paradox:

> Most schools around like they’re kinda strict, but then loose as well. Because you would find that ok, most of our schools, they use corporal punishment. So if you do something wrong, they’re gonna punish you, but then at the same time, if you do something wrong, they don’t care about you. Like they don’t ask why you did that and how can we help you if there was a reason why you did that. They just beat you up and [you] go back to class and that’s it. So it doesn’t really fix the problem.”

Launch’s manual section on “discipline” states, “Our expectation is that everyone at Launch is capable of self-direction, and does not have to be coerced to conform to particular ways of behaving through threats of punishment or manipulation.” All teachers, students, and parents must sign a contract to adhere to the code of conduct for employment or admission at the school. The manual describes the discipline policy as “invitational,” inviting students and teachers to internalize and live the Code of Conduct values. Several of the values are interpreted as expectations to voice complexity, perhaps most emphatically, “Confront issues.” Emphasis on confrontation in LO and throughout Launch was an adjustment for Ms. Ntsika.

> At my previous school we didn’t have a common code of conduct for students and for learners. For me, from my background, there’s a huge separation between a learner and

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a teacher. I came from schools where you can’t say to an adult ‘I’m disagreeing with you’. This ‘disagreement’ thing (starts laughing) for me it was just a mess! Haibo! How are these children disagreeing? And they are saying it to this White man! I still had that stereotypical thinking that White men are superior than anything else. And this man is just accepting this. And there was this Muslim lady Farza with this Life Orientation circle. I questioned this at first because sometimes children would come out crying from this room. And I was just saying ‘What is done in this room?!’ Up until I got introduced to it, for me Life Orientation was just in the book. Not in the circle. So that was a huge change in my life. And something that I could hold onto, although the process was sometimes rough. It’s either you get into that room and you go out grown, or feeling destroyed, in the sense that the destruction part will be productive—we are not used to being told things as they are, you know, no beating about the bush. And funny enough for me sometimes you would be told by people that are younger than you.

LO was used as a space to stage dialogue between students and teachers when issues of performance or behavior, on the part of either, came up within a class. As one alum explained, “LO allowed learners to express their views regardless of how old the person you’re confronting, which is very rare in our communities. Usually it’s rude to speak up to an elder even when they’re wrong because of that ‘You’re wrong, I’m right’ mentality. So it allowed us to challenge that narrative with students and teachers.” Another past student told me, “We were taught to think and own our spaces. Be emotionally available and challenge norms that are oppressive to us.” When asked what distinguishes a Launch learner, Ms. Ntsika proudly responded with a statement I would hear echoed repeatedly during my research, “A Launch student has got a voice.” She continued, “A Launch student is strong. A Launch student can overcome every challenge. Launch students are independent thinkers. They can be on their own. They are versatile, you can put a Launch learner in any space, you can even put a Launch learner in a space where there are toooo many White people and that learner’s voice will not be shut down.”
While students spoke about growing from expressing themselves openly in spite of hierarchies of race, class, gender, and age, they also raised the difficulty of negotiating Launch’s emphasis on student voice with norms outside the school. Thandiwe, Grade 12 student, explained:

*Our school teaches us something and then when we go back home, it contradicts with what we were taught initially as part of our culture. Before I came to Launch, I was really quiet, down to earth. Then they introduced the whole concept of “I have a voice.” Debate and LO exposed me to talking, to challenging people even if they are the same age or older. If I don’t agree with someone, I challenge them. So because I was doing that at school, when I go back home now I find myself challenging my dad on some of the things that he says, not in a disrespectful way, but still challenging him nonetheless and that’s not how as a Black person and especially as a girl I am supposed to do. We were raised up to be respectful and go with whatever adults or men say you see? So now I get to challenge all of that. Sometimes people from my community might see that as being disrespectful because, as a girl, and as a Black person, you have to be obedient on what your elders are saying, but that’s not what I get from school, so I constantly feel like when I’m at home and when I’m at school, I have to switch personalities. Here, I can be free and live with the code of conduct from school and then when I get home, I have to switch again and go to the code of conduct I have to live by at home.*

Students raised this often and one of the classes even led a community meeting about it focused on the question of, *“do you confront issues with family and how?”*

Inclusion of family in the “invitational” approach to student discipline and description of Launch as part of the “extended family” were common. At the beginning of each school year there is a parent orientation for the families of Grade 8 learners, considered new inductees into the unique culture of Launch. When I attended in January 2018 and 2019, I heard the principal Siphiwe, a Launch graduate from Langa, give the oft-cited annual “Three-Legged Pot” speech. The metaphor refers to the cast iron pot, or potjie, used widely across cultural contexts in South Africa to cook food on an open fire, especially in rural areas. Launch uses it to signify the necessity of collaboration between teachers, learners, and families (the three legs) to advance the transformation detailed in its mission. Thabisa, teacher and alum, told me
I think Launch helps families also go through the emotional journey students go through. They call in parents to school a lot and help facilitate conversations between the child and the parents. From there, a lot of parents start being able to have constant conversations and open up a little with their kids. So I would say it helps build stronger relationships in families.

I witnessed these call-ins on several occasions, including when a group of grade 10s were found consuming alcohol at school and, instead of being “asked to leave,” as the admission contract lays out for this infraction, their families, principal, teachers, and classmates convened in an LO style session complete with a large circle around the perimeter of the school’s biggest classroom and lots of tears and deliberating for almost two hours before a way forward was agreed upon. Ms. Ntsika contrasts Launch’s intervention with disciplinary structures in her previous school, for both children and adults. She recalled how students and teachers who struggled with alcoholism were expelled, fired, or “left alone to be independent in their own mess” and brought this up when contrasting Launch, where, even on staff, “everybody else feels that I am trying to help this person get better from where he or she is.”

When I spoke with families about their views on Launch’s encouragement of student voice and the LO process, they embraced it and some said it was a reason they sent their child to Launch. Nomathemba, a parent originally from outside of Komani (formerly Queenstown) in the Eastern Cape who works at an organization in Langa that offers technology training and work placement support to 18-25 year olds, explains that Ms. Ntsika actually introduced her and her colleagues to the LO circle process. They adopted it from Launch to help young job seekers, especially those without matric or higher education qualifications like herself, to “open up and find their voices.” It was the reason she wanted her son to attend when she brought him from the
Eastern Cape to live with her in Cape Town in Grade 8 and why she was considering sending her younger kids.

The thing that interested me most is their Life Orientation program, because I want my children to know who they are and I want them to belong to a community not just to study and become a loner kind of a person—that’s not what I want, I want them to be able to open up and all that. I know I’m a very strict parent so sometimes it’s not easy to talk to me as a parent so I want them to have a safe space where they are able to share. So Launch was the obvious choice. Other schools have the Life Orientation subject but it’s not kind of an intervention like here at Launch. To me the thing that is standing out is their openness. Launch is also unique in the sense of the confidence it fosters.

Nomathemba also expressed that Launch’s offering of a safe space for her son to open up was especially crucial for him navigating the transition from their family’s more comfortable status in a rural community in the Eastern Cape to living in a township context where “we have to be on guard all the time.” She had recently reunited with and married her children’s father and taken her sister’s son as her own after her sister passed, so they were navigating household transitions as well. On the issue of competing understandings of youth voice in school and household, she clarified,

We encourage their voice, but in finding your voice you don’t have to lose the respect. I encourage my children to ask questions to ask for clarity when they don’t understand. But as long as they do that with respect. It doesn’t change the fact that I’m still your mother because now you’re angry with me. We have our own share of family issues so when I brought my son here and we reunited, I knew it was a difficult thing to talk about. For myself as well, it was difficult to confront, but I had to sit him down and we had to talk. So it wasn’t easy for all of us. But at least he got to tell me how he was feeling.

However, Nomathemba went on to offer an important critique of Launch that illuminates a broader contradiction in how the school conceptualizes “voice” and its role in “healing” in a “multiply wounded country.” While she had long valued from afar the school’s LO approach and the fostering of confidence in learners, now that her son was actually a student she felt it was
then ironic and disappointing that families’ voices were not part of school governance. There was
an instance in her son’s grade of a young and vocal Black history teacher leaving and being
replaced in the middle of the year. Before a new teacher was hired, another staff member covered
his classes. According to Nomathemba, the school did not attempt to officially inform families in
any way. “As a parent at Launch, one thing that I’m worried about is how they manage staff and
the whole staffing processes because for instance my child had three teachers in one year. So it’s
just not on. I didn’t feel as if there was a space that was given to parents to voice out how they
feel about that whole process. For me, in terms of that, they failed.”

If Nomathemba’s child was in a public school, this “space...to voice out” would be a
constitutionally guaranteed component of the school. There would be representation of her voice
through a democratically elected School Governing Body (SGB), including parent, teacher, staff,
and learner representatives, which would be informed about and have influence over school
decisions. As a parent who is clearly seeking information and influence on decisions in her
child’s school beyond simply her own child’s behavior, she could leverage this legally required
organ to invigorate a parent/guardian presence in governance, even if it was lacking or not
functional when she arrived. SGBs, introduced in the 1996 South African Schools Act, are the
result of antiapartheid struggles on the part of Black parents, learners, and teachers in Parent-
Teacher-Student Associations (PTSAs) for “people's education for people's power.” “The
concepts of democracy, access and equity emerged in the call for a unitary anti-racist and anti-
sexist schooling system, an end to sexual harassment and corporal punishment, better resource
provisioning, a different curriculum and free compulsory education” (Vally 2007, 42).

Independent schools like Launch are privately governed by appointed boards and not legally
required to have these democratic structures, although they are not prevented from it, and private schools serving wealthy communities often have representative bodies for family and learner input. While Launch’s facilitated discussions with students and families are progressive in contrast to corporal punishment and other vestiges of apartheid social engineering in township government schools, they fall short of the “people’s power” called for in these struggles, by omitting official avenues for family voice in school governance. Furthermore, as employees at a low-fee private school, teachers at Launch, most of whom are Black, many of whom are alumni, and many of whom described their arrival in Cape Town as migrants from throughout the country and the continent, are not unionized. With Launch’s extended hours, they work 10 hour weekdays—as well as many Saturdays, public holidays, and evenings, since the school holds enrichment programs to ensure the promise of high matric pass rates and all around “transformation” and “empowerment” of learners. The 2015 establishment of a new union, the Private Schools and Allied Workers Union (Prisawu), which is specifically recruiting teachers from South Africa’s burgeoning low-fee private school industry, signals growing labor rights concerns in this sector (Nkosi 2015). While Launch teachers were sometimes surprisingly forthcoming about traumatic personal experiences, they were understandably more cautious about discussing labor issues and employment grievances while talking to a researcher in their workplace. Some indicated that the strain of additional hours and expectations was exacerbated by the imperative for teachers to form part of an “extended family” by simultaneously holding space for student trauma and confronting their own woundedness in the process. When asked what aspect of Launch should change, one alumna teacher commented on this affective labor, “Make the emotional, personal development work less intense for
It is easier to work with students than to work with adults, and I think teachers were not given enough space and time to really slowly work through their emotional journey. There was a lot of pressure and force which resulted into some huge conflicts that we ended up witnessing as students.”

Reflecting back on her own work as a teacher and principal, Ms. Ntsika raised “difficult conversations” that she felt, in the spirit of LO, must be grappled with. The first was parent involvement. “Parents are neglected in some of the processes and especially parents that have learners in these prestigious schools. They are even afraid of going there and challenging. The fact that the kids are accepted at those schools they feel like it’s a cherry on top or something.”

By “cherry on top,” she was indicating that, in the context of a grossly unequal system characterized by intense competition for spots in “good” schools, Black parents/guardians are made to feel as if a spot for their child in such a school is a gift, and they should feel lucky or grateful. Additionally, she reflected on teacher experiences and how the family metaphor and encouragement of disclosure and emotional openness can lend itself to manipulation.

“It was a space where there was a family kind of situation, but it got away from a sense of building to a sense of build and destroy. Some teachers that were good and so passionate about what they were doing left. Because the process that we have at Launch, which is beautiful in that it has grown people, most of them, including myself, has sometimes not been used in a right way. There were agendas we were all not aware of up until we could feel that “hey man some people are feeling destroyed in the space.

On two separate occasions, I ran into former Launch teachers driving Uber to supplement their incomes, who described their experiences of the mandate of “sharing as much as possible” as coercive and reported struggling with the imperative for all teachers, including those without
counseling credentials, to process their own and students’ issues while maintaining healthy boundaries in a non-unionized workplace with significant additional time and labor demands.

Writing on trauma and the limits of testimony and truth-telling in the TRC, anthropologist Rosalind Morris (2011) highlights the trap of “voice” as a stand-in for recognition, and argues that a hollow emphasis on vocalization decoupled from material redistribution or political representation can actually exacerbate racialized and sexualized exclusion.

[T]he task of achieving representability, of “acquiring a voice” in the political sense, is a complex one that remains relentlessly vulnerable to the lure of mere appearance and/or vocalization in public. When this happens, and the achievement of visibility is not transformed into a mode of accessing recognition, there is a redoubling of the fetishistic structure by which racialized and sexualized exclusion operates. The TRC had to negotiate this lure...It was haunted by the fact that it appeared to promise new structures of recognition (and on that basis a just distribution of rights and goods), when in fact it could only make visible the gap between the achievement of visibility and a fuller transformation of the structures of (political) representation (Morris 2011, 395).

Launch’s focus on helping everyone at the school “find” their voices is cast as a trauma intervention and a social justice initiative. Yet, as Morris points out and as Noma relays in her experience as a Launch parent, encouragement of marginalized voices does not necessarily equate to their formal recognition. In fact, celebration of voice and visibility without political representation can actually distract from fuller structural transformation, because it can easily be construed as or confused for the latter in ways that redouble exclusion and inequality.

Furthermore, pedagogy, no matter how steeped in discourses of care, cannot be truly trauma-informed or empowering if it unfolds in undemocratic structures that disempower workers and families. In fact, trauma-informed approaches that rely on overextension of non-unionized teachers can result in an imbrication of care and violence where teachers, increasingly alumni with a sense of loyalty to the school “family,” are called to act as Herculean agents of change.
and be pleasantly self-sacrificing to make up for a range of material inequities. Launch’s manual describes colonialism and apartheid and their legacies as a “loss of personal empowerment” addressed by “focused emotional and cognitive intervention,” as opposed to systemic injustices also requiring structural intervention. Empowerment pedagogy’s portrayal of trauma as solely individual and interior and its focus on activation of individual voices forwards a notion of healing as the atomized transformations of selves, and can discourage collective political mobilization to also transform conditions under which people learn, labor, and live.

3.4 Breathing Toward . . . : Aspiration as “Violent and Life-Saving”

It was the fourth of “Januworry” 2019—results day, the culmination of months of stress. Some were celebrating and others mourning possible futures for themselves, their relatives, their neighbors. Many 2018 matrics had just returned from spending the festive season at home in the Eastern Cape. Most would return to the school to collect their fates. Those who would rather process their results elsewhere could check online or receive an SMS through the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC). Results were also published in major newspapers. They headlined front pages, dominated social media, and everywhere I went, people were talking about them. Memes competed with political cartoons to lighten the mood. Lists ranking the provinces flooded news feeds, fueling political wars as the DA-70-governed Western Cape routinely contends with the ANC-led Gauteng for the top spot. Triumph narratives confirming that disadvantaged youth can beat all odds through hard work and resilience were tweeted and

70 The Democratic Alliance (DA) is the official opposition party of the ruling African National Congress (ANC). They govern only one of the nine provinces of South Africa: the Western Cape, which includes Cape Town. Recent, high profile resignations of some of the party’s few Black leaders have entrenched its reputation as a white center-liberal party (Maimane 2019). Particularly, during my research, Patricia de Lille’s October 2018 resignation from both the DA and the office of Mayor of Cape Town caused a major stir (de Lille 2018). This was also on the heels of 2017 tweets from Helen Zille, DA leader and former Western Cape Premier, about the benefits of colonialism that were erosive to the party’s reputation among Black South Africans (France-Presse 2017).
retweeted ad nauseum. In one post, shared fifteen thousand times and covered in several newspapers, the number two performer in the country was pictured proudly holding his results next to a photo of his mother hawking fruits on a street corner with the hashtag #BlackExcellence. One of the comments proclaimed “this kid proves being poor is no disability!” Critical voices chimed in to contextualize the numbers and expose their manipulation for political ends, for example pointing out that only fifty percent of students who begin grade R in South Africa even make it to Grade 12 and not all pass levels grant access to tertiary study, rendering steadily rising pass rates suspect.

When I arrived at Launch, Babalwa, Thabisa, and other LO teachers were there to help. They would have one-on-one conversations with each student about their results, their goals, where they had applied or been provisionally accepted (pending scores), applications for funding sources like NSFAS\(^1\) and bursaries, and their next steps. For students who failed the exam or fell short of their desired pass level, they would support in requesting a re-mark from the education department or applying to rewrite. Later that day, I would join a conference call where the director, principals, and a few board members would discuss the network wide results. While we waited for students to arrive, Babalwa and Thabisa reminisced on their results day in 2007, noting how much things had improved since they were matrics. Back then, instead of printing unique ID numbers that could be kept private, newspapers printed students’ names with their results, acting as a naming and shaming in many cases. People checked for their marks and their neighbors.’ Those who fell short were embarrassed to walk the streets. While self-harming

\(^1\) The National Student Financial Aid Scheme, based on household income, for study at public higher education institutions. Prior to 2017, it included loans, but after the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall student protests, the government announced free higher education for poor and working class students from that year on.
behavior is still a concern, as indicated by news outlets’ footnotes with suicide hotlines and “celebrate responsibly” warnings against binge-drinking, Babalwa described it as much worse under the former reporting scheme. They also discussed issues of equity, for example the fact that 25 years into a democracy celebrated for multilingualism, students can only write exams in English and Afrikaans. Thabisa wondered what scores may have awaited some of her peers who attended government schools if they could have written maths or science exams in their home language. The teachers also reminded me that matric results determine much more than high school graduation, and offered a refresher in the four different types of passes. A National Senior Certificate Pass is the minimum for high school completion, commonly an entry into blue-collar work, but increasingly into precarity. A Higher Certificate Pass enables admission to certificate courses focused on practical training and qualifications. A Diploma Pass allows access to bridging or diploma courses at a public or private TVET (Technical and Vocational Education and Training) college. A Bachelor Pass (along with particular subject distinctions) enables admission to a bachelor’s degree course at a public university, typically regarded as a ticket to a prestigious profession and fulfilling life. Failure is considered to seal a life sentence of poverty.

“We were studying for our lives.” Thabisa’s heavy words hung in the almost empty classroom as she recounted pressing on without pause when her father died during the exams. I was sitting in as she and Babalwa discussed her results. Like several classmates, Thabisa resided in an informal structure shared by her parents and two siblings with intermittent electricity and no taps so she spent almost the entire six week exam period staying with friends who gathered at the home of a classmate who resided in a brick house with more conducive
conditions, frequently “crossnighting”\textsuperscript{72} to cram. Her classmate’s parents even temporarily vacated the space along with young children to leave it to the matrics. Students in her neighborhood who did not have such means or connections studied in crowded hostels or by paraffin lamps in shacks or leaned on their schools or churches for after-hours work spaces. In addition to after-school sessions, Launch hosts a “matric camp” before the exam in a scenic, mountainous area about an hour from Cape Town, to help students academically and emotionally prepare for the grueling period. Thembisa lamented not being present when her father passed, but affirmed that she followed his wishes to focus on exams. She had been nervous to come to school that day, but now relieved that she achieved a Bachelor Pass, making her the first in her family to earn a matric. Her results would seal her provisional acceptance to study pharmacy at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) and presumably enable her to elevate the family’s financial circumstances. Reflecting on how she managed the overwhelming combination of pressure and grief, she named Life Orientation. Describing herself as a formerly shy person who kept troubles to herself, she explained that LO had gradually helped her open up. Her peer group had helped her manage the loss by extending processes from LO into their evening study gatherings. Particularly, she shared, “\textit{some of my classmates could relate because they lost their parents, too, so they reflected for me, and that got me through}.”

One of those classmates was Thandiwe, who failed. This is always a small cohort (ten out of 154 across all six campuses and three out of 26 that year at the Langa campus); pass rates consistently above 95\% across campuses are one of Launch’s central selling points. Thandiwe’s results came as a shock, as she was a star debater, brilliant writer, avid reader, and an outspoken

\textsuperscript{72} Pulling all-nighters.
voice in LO. Months earlier, she was toasting to her future at the matric ball, stylishly dressed in a black tux. She aspired to study law or politics at university, but was even more passionate about her goal to publish a book of poetry to “address misconceptions and build pride about being dark-skinned, disabled, mentally ill, or just different.” She described her neighborhood as one of the “safe, peaceful” areas of Langa and her father was in the process of buying their house, but she still felt pressure to start contributing financially since he was “the mother and father of the house.” Months before exams, she shared, “I greatly feel like I can bring change in our country. I’m a very big dreamer.” Thandiwe did not show up at school to get her results. We met up a few days later at a mall for me to drop off a book that she had expressed interest in. She shared that Launch would support her in rewriting the maths and physical science exams (the subjects she needed more marks in) by paying for the costs of the supplementary exams and letting her sit in those classes with next year’s Grade 12s to prepare. She named mental health as her main barrier while writing the exams. While she attributed some of it to the loss of her mom, she felt the bigger factor was the anxiety induced by thinking about her future and dreams while her whole family looked up to her to take them out of the township. After completing this research in 2019, Thandiwe and I kept in touch intermittently via WhatsApp. She rewrote in 2019 and did not achieve the scores she needed to pass. She was planning to rewrite again in 2020, but, when the pandemic hit, she lost motivation. Although she was growing less certain about that route, she affirmed, “I’m not a quitter. I’ll keep going until things work out.” When we last spoke in August 2021, I asked her if she was still writing. As a matric, her poetry had been popular with peers, and she had published fiction to positive reviews on a social reading app. She was working on several writing projects to stave off the anxiety of job hunting,
but her writing had gone in a new direction. Alerting me that more people are making a living using social media platforms, she shared a ten-page pitch for a reality TV game show, with outlines of five pilot episodes she aims to produce for YouTube. Contestants compete live to overcome obstacles in a series of missions largely determined by luck and guesswork, so they can avoid humiliating punishments reserved for losers. One mission entails solving quizzes to gain hints for a "long and arduous search" around the city for golden tickets that can purchase "head starts" on future missions. Clear to the hosts and audience but unbeknownst to players, traps are laid from the outset. She titled the game simply, "The Quest."

Who is responsible for Thandiwe failing the matric exam? Is it her? Her teachers? Her family or community? Or is it the larger set of conditions in which they all work and live? And how do pedagogies that portray the heightening of aspiration as an intervention to the trauma of navigating poverty and racism obscure a view of these conditions? Christina Sharpe’s (2016) argument that “aspiration is violent and life-saving” echoes what late South African novelist K Sello Duiker (2001) has called “the quiet violence of dreams.” For Black youth navigating the afterlives of colonialism and apartheid, and the enduring inequity of racial capitalism in its neoliberal dispensation, aspiration can simultaneously asphyxiate and generate breathing room. The pitch behind Launch and many education reform organizations—enhancing marginalized youth’s capacity to aspire—is often objectively understood as justice work. Yet, pedagogies of aspiration rest on often unquestioned premises that actually reinforce the violence of extreme racialized inequality by upholding the meritocratic myth that legitimizes education as that great sorting machine, doling out degrees, secure employment, and opportunity—or else poverty and precarity—on the basis of effort and “deservingness.” Aspiration, at least in its hegemonic forms,
is about winning a brutal game, not ending it. About directing your breath toward a social
mobility that requires surpassing others—your parents, your peers—even as you aim to lift them.
It is about achieving a high pass on the exam, earning a tertiary degree, getting a good job. But
the violence of aspiration is not reserved for losers. Those, like Thembisa, who ostensibly “win”
this rigged game, are not spared, as the strain of striving and the sacrifices she navigated are
glossed and glorified as “resilience,” which in turn is cited as proof that success is possible, and
repurposed as disciplining lessons to others to refocus on the hard work of beating odds versus
questioning them. And, as the #FeesMustFall movement drove home, even those who gain
access to university continue to teeter dangerously close to elimination at each step of “the
quest.” Ironically, pedagogies of aspiration can be pitched as trauma intervention, means of
healing wounds inflicted by violent histories, even as the pressures of aspiring on an uneven
playing field introduce additional distress.

Teachers often described Launch as consciously attempting to work within this trap,
while working against it. While they understood and took seriously the model’s implicit promise
(to funders, parents, students) to deliver high matric passes and tertiary access, what the founder
called “the usual metrics,” many had a broader view of the types of aspirations being inculcated.
One alum on staff told me, “Students aren’t at Launch because we want them to go to university
and become a chartered accountant. That’s not the main reason they’re here, what we really
want is that they learn to become good parents, good partners, good people. So that we can have
better future leaders of this country. That is more important than a university degree.” Some
leaned into the other pole of Sharpe’s (2016) paradox that, in the wake in which we live,
aspiration is also “life-saving” (113). “Breathing space” is necessary for surviving the pressures
of hostile atmospheres, “a little breathing room before the next onslaught” (111). While these spaces may not be able to deliver anything called justice, “one can only hold one’s breath for so long” (111). Many students described Launch, and particularly Life Orientation circle, as a breathing space. It was the space where Babalwa, the alumna teacher who opened this chapter recounting how she “didn’t like” breathing when she started high school, could finally breathe and “feel and speak...and be free.” The space that alerted her to the possibility that she could “do something” beyond Grade 12. Individual freedom narratives do not necessarily ameliorate the violence of the atmosphere. They can even perpetuate it when deployed as proof of what’s possible in ways that avert attention from grappling with the conditions that lead to an unjust probable. Yet, Launch and its offering of breathing space to Babalwa and others cannot be dismissed. Its impact is highlighted by even the most critical students and graduates. One alum formerly on staff explained that it reached far beyond her time and relations during high school. Knowing some of her story, I felt the weight when she told me, “Because LO made me emotionally strong and able to acknowledge and deal with my feelings, I was able to not break even in the worst case incidents of my life.”

3.5 Open Wounds: On the Impossibility of Healing Without Justice

I met Anathi while in her neighborhood picking up a book from Lukhanyo who suggested that, in our walk from his neighborhood to the taxi rank, we were bound to run into more past students. I had begun connecting with people from a wider range of postsecondary tracks when I realized my engagements mostly with alumni working for the institution might narrow my understanding of the school’s impact. Indeed, we ran into a taxi company owner who praised Launch’s encouragement of his entrepreneurialism, an alumna who explained that becoming a
mom had interrupted her tertiary studies but the school had positively impacted her parenting, a young woman who flatly declined further conversation upon hearing I was researching the school, and Anathi, who invited us to stop in her place and chat. After matriculating in university she earned a degree in marketing and secured a job as a social media manager at a digital marketing agency. Her true passion is fashion design, which was unsurprising from her impeccable style, but no less stunning when she showed me her freelance work making attire for traditional weddings and other occasions. When we met, Anathi was in the midst of moving out of the township to one of Cape Town’s suburbs, and still lived in one of Langa’s hostels, which had originally been constructed for solo occupation by male migrants working for companies in the city during the colonial and apartheid eras. When Lukhanyo mentioned he was thirsty, she informed us the taps were off. As we passed around my water bottle, I mentioned the #DayZero drought countdown signs across the city. They rolled their eyes, explaining every day was Day Zero in the township due to longstanding service unreliability. It insulted them that hysteria took hold only once the ordinary deprivation they continuously endured threatened wealthy,

73 Hostels are living quarters originally designed as highly socially controlled spaces for Black male migrant workers to live in without their families, visiting home once a year. Architectural features enabled surveillance and restriction of movement. While many have been “upgraded” for family use, the shape and interiors, which were designed “primarily for the containment of labour and not for human comfort,” remain (Miller 2022). During the colonial and apartheid eras, hostel living was shaped by the broader violations of the migrant labor system’s coercive nature and influx control measures that heavily restricted Africans’ access to permanent urban residency and largely defined them as “‘temporary sojourners’ in the city” (de Satgé and Watson 2018, 79). See Mamphela Ramphele’s A Bed Called Home (1993) documenting the lives of hostel dwellers in Cape Town, and Nomkhosi Xulu-Gama’s Hostels in South Africa (2017) on the transformation of single-sex men's hostels to family accommodations in Durban.

74 From mid 2017-mid 2018, Cape Town was slated to become the first major city in the world to run out of water. “Day Zero” was shorthand for the moment major dams would drop below 13.5 percent, taps would shut off, and people would have to queue for daily water rations. The irony for many township residents was that public education campaigns ignored inequality. Because of infrastructure gaps like communal standpipes instead of in-house connections, their water usage already complied with or fell below new restrictions. Yet many reported water being shut off in communities that taxed municipal resources least (Baker 2018).
predominantly White areas that consume the most water with luxuries like pools and washers.

Explaining her decision to leave, Anathi described the mental toll of her living conditions,

*I just couldn’t cope with work and staying here. I don’t think it’s a good place for any human to actually stay in, especially if you live in the poorest sides of Langa because it’s quite segregated between lower income and middle class. If you’re middle class here, you’re also relatively poor, but your conditions are better because you live in a house with privacy, whereas when I was a kid we shared this room with three to five different families, there’s a bed that side, a bed on the other side, a bed this side and it’s rat and cockroach infested and generally nothing works. Now, because everyone has died or went back to the Eastern Cape, I have the space to myself, but it just started getting too much, too depressing. When I was a child it wasn’t a problem because we didn’t know any better. Even if we were disadvantaged we just made the best we can with what we had. We even created our own games because we didn’t have toys. So if we see a rope we’re gonna take it and play skipping rope games with anything. We didn’t have the pink hula hoops but we’d take those dark orange water pipes, connect them and have a hula hoop. But as you grow older you experience all the social ills. You start seeing the problems. I came to realize that it was not a place meant for humans or humanity.*

Anathi was speaking quite literally about her realization that townships and hostels were not designed for humanity. She went on to explain her frustration that it was only in her 20s that she started to become aware of the history of the structure she lived in. She did not take history in high school and described herself as “*oblivious*” about “*politics and the brutal history of Black people*” when she graduated Launch, noting how her condensed and “*whitewashed*” understanding of apartheid was illuminated when she encountered peers at university calling for “*decolonization*” and first considered the longer history of colonialism. As we walked to the taxi for me to head to town and her to drop some things at her new place, we agreed to meet for a longer conversation.

A few weeks later I was in an Uber turning onto the Nelson Mandela Boulevard section of the N2 on the way to meet Anathi at her office, when we passed a “*District Six*” road sign.

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75 It’s debatable whether the history curriculum would have changed this, given the critiques described earlier.
pointing toward my destination perfectly blending in with all the others. Having established my US background, the driver asked if I noticed the sign was actually plakked (pasted over). I recognized that the area where Anathi’s multinational ad agency employers had established a posh office amidst trendy bars, startups, and condos was actually the historic site of forced removals of Black residents from the multiracial District Six neighborhood to the Cape Flats after the area was declared “White” in 1966. Yet I completely missed this guerrilla art/protest until the driver pointed it out. The area was officially renamed Zonnebloem in 1970. Refusing to accept erasure of a well-known site of trauma, Haroon Gunn-Salie undertook a public art intervention called “Zonnebloem Renamed” in 2013, on the centenary of the 1913 Natives Land Act. He printed plaks in the style of official road signs and pasted “District Six” over all references to Zonnebloem (Makhubu 2017). As the city has not removed them, they remain to this day, rendering Cape Town as “canvas to raise the ghosts of South Africa's past” (Berman 2014).

These ghosts, and the extent to which they figure in South Africa’s present and Launch’s approach, were a focal point of Anathi’s reflections. When I arrived at her job, a few desks in the open plan office were still occupied by colleagues unwinding with cocktails, so she ushered me to a small conference room where we could chat freely. I could not help but notice the breathtaking vista of Table Mountain, the flipped image of the view we had had from her Langa neighborhood on the other side of the mountain weeks prior. In our taxi ride that day she had

76 Dutch for “sunflower.”

77 Though many were dispossessed of land before 1913, the constitution mandates land restitution from 1913 because of the 1913 Natives Land Act, which created Black reserves, allocated less than a tenth of arable land to Africans and the rest to white settlers, and stipulated that Black people could live outside reserves only with proof of employment (Modisane, Collis-Buthelezi, and Ouma 2017; Plaatje 2014).
shared the paradoxes of working in a White-dominated agency in a country where ninety percent of consumers are Black and over half live below the poverty line, as well as the alienation of commuting from the hostel to an office where her few Black colleagues are mostly middle class and Model C–educated, and the ways she is repeatedly called on by superiors to “translate” ad hoc without compensation, both literally and figuratively in terms of insider knowledge she is presumed to have about Black tastes. As of late, she reported asserting herself more in the space, on that day by not covering her afro with a wig, as she often does due to racist impressions of its “untidiness.” Anathi credited LO for preparing her to navigate the psychic strain of this shapeshifting without “losing” her self. Describing herself as “shy” and “too obedient” when she arrived at Launch, she specifically named Joseph’s impact on her development. “He shaped me, the whole experience, the Code of Conduct, Life Orientation, helped me learn about my feelings, recognize them, communicate them and call out or confront things I don’t like. That’s one thing I know for sure I got out of Launch, but the sad thing is, it’s not like the rest of the world works like that.”

Asked what she would and would not change about Launch, Anathi gave the same response, LO, offering a critique that shaped my questions about trauma-informed pedagogy.

I would have appreciated if Launch conscientized learners about how the social ills are the result of our history as South Africans. Now that I'm older, it feels as though, it was trying to suppress that part of learning which could have impacted our growth and understanding of why our lives are the way they are. Why it is necessary for Launch to exist. Their idea was more to keep us away from the negativity in townships.

Anathi described Launch’s response to “social ills” as the creation of a haven that shields selected students from these ills in order to heighten the students’ capacity to aspire. As she points out, that approach does not simultaneously equip students with an understanding of the
structural sources of these social ills, and how they shape collective and personal experiences of trauma. While Launch operates within the constraints of a national curriculum critiqued for its cursory engagement with a complex past, their celebrated choice to extend far beyond the national curriculum in LO could additionally be harnessed toward the “conscientizing” she calls for. Her use of “suppress” suggests this is not merely omission, but inhibition.

Anathi wasn’t the only one to raise this. Other students and alumni shared critical feedback like “Students are not taught enough about what is happening in our country and the world currently; they are taught to go to university and nothing else,” and “Politics should be a subject—students know nothing about politics in high school level.” Some pointed out that other high schools would not have provided this either, but called Launch to account precisely on the grounds of its mission of being an “intervention school” enabling “healing” in a “multiply wounded country.” Their critiques suggest healing is impossible without equipping students with a structural analysis of these wounds, and Anathi’s move from history to the present tense suggests the wounds remain open. Her emphatic “why”’s call for an LO that pushes beyond self-awareness to interrogation of the shared circumstances that shape students’ lives. While some asserted that Launch’s very structure as a selective, fee-paying school prevents it from solving broader educational inequity, Anathi suggests its LO circles could function as a forum for those selected to interrogate the shared reality, but fall short of that.

Strikingly, this echoes critical scholarship on another famous healing process: the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Mahmood Mamdani (2015) has argued that, while its non-legislative design and mandate were incompatible with delivering any version of justice, it was a
“civic educational process” with power to shape public understandings of history, its connections to the present, and the work ahead (72). This potential was forfeited.

[T]he TRC had access to state resources and could reach right into South African living rooms during prime time. It needed to educate ordinary South Africans, black and white, about everyday apartheid and its impact on the life chances and circumstances of generations of South Africans. Such an education would have brought home to one and all the morality and the necessity of social justice. It would at least have educated them as to why the political reform that had brought them an end to juridical and political apartheid was unlikely to hold in the absence of social justice....[instead] the TRC understood violence as criminal, not political; as driven by individual perpetrators, and not groups of beneficiaries; as targeting identifiable, individual victims, and not entire groups. It focused on violence as excess, not as norm. (Mamdani 2015, 77))

Rather than simply failing to activate a demand for social justice, the TRC functioned as a public education in an individualized understanding of violence and justice. Similarly, Launch’s healing agenda, with its focus on transforming individual hearts and minds as the most appropriate means to transform structures of power, without also fostering an in-depth understanding of these structures, educates students for resilience while mystifying the unjust circumstances that demand it.

The school’s approach is an example of how investments in liberalism can eclipse the liberatory (Shange 2019, 138)—how the liberal fixation on the individual as the locus of change compromises commitments to trauma-informed pedagogies in a “multiply wounded country.” This conundrum came up explicitly in a two-hour discussion with Launch’s central development team. I was eager to meet with them because they position the organization to external audiences and within the larger landscape of South African schooling. This meeting included the founder/executive director; the managers of operations, fundraising, marketing, accounts, events (an alum), and human resources; and a US-based management consultant serving as an executive
coach. While my day-to-day interactions with this team were limited, given their offsite location since the school’s move into Langa, I also attended fundraising events and holiday parties, as well as a board meeting, to get a sense of higher-level decision making. At one point during the discussion, thinking of Anathi’s assertion that the school’s approach suppresses learning about “why it is necessary for Launch to exist.” I asked the central development staff, why does Launch exist? From this, a follow up emerged, is Launch’s work political? Initial responses echoed student and parent portrayals of the school as an escape hatch from the extremes of the South African schooling crisis: a way out of overcrowded, under-resourced, low-performing government schools in townships, and an alternative to prohibitive fees, long commutes, and coercive assimilation required for access to wealthy public and private schools. Launch’s relative position as “best-case scenario” (Shange 2019) for “disadvantaged” youth in a “broken” system was asserted as a form of social justice.

Some responses framed Launch’s work in relation to explosive news that had broken two days before our November 2018 discussion—that the first Black teacher in a subject other than isiXhosa at Rustenburg Girls, a formerly White Cape Town public school founded in 1894, had been coerced by the school governing body into leaving her position. The teacher, a Rustenburg alum, was first forced into a “mentorship” program that left her more “traumatised than supported,” then given an ultimatum to resign (Fokazi 2018). The dominant theme of the discussion was the blatant Rustenburg racism, described by one of Launch’s founding teachers, a Capetonian of English descent who now coordinates admissions, as evidence that “the whole definition between White/Black is perpetrated again and again and again. So we’ve got a whole new spectrum of kids who are going out with their parents’ perception thinking ‘we’re better than
This incident was deployed as evidence of why Launch must exist, particularly its Tomorrow’s Leaders program that not only hires Black youth as teachers, but shapes them into school leaders. A few team members who described themselves as Black or Coloured discussed personal experiences of racism as students or parents at Model C or elite private schools, mentioning issues like perceptions of intelligence based on accents, and lack of teacher diversity no matter how much student bodies had diversified. Explaining why she sent her child to one of these schools despite high fees and pressure to conform to White norms, one staff member said, “I want what’s better for her. Not for an accent or whatever else. So that she can learn. So she’s not sitting in a fifty-kid classroom.”

In this discussion, Launch’s existence was also framed in relation to “low expectations” at government schools in townships. One staff member raised this historically in relation to his own experience of schooling saying, “in the previous educational dispensation. If you were Black or Coloured, we were often regarded as substandard. But in the Launch context, you are not just good enough to be a human being, you’re good enough to be a leader, you’re good enough to be an agent of change, you are good enough to inspire other people.” Joseph followed up by offering context. “At the time Launch started, we were talking about ‘lost generations’ and there was a lost generation of—well there were endless lost generations during colonial times, there were endless lost generations during apartheid times and post ’94, surprise surprise, ten years later, when Launch started in 2004, there was another lost generation.” The mention of “lost generations” was notable because it invoked a widespread 90s-era racialized discourse of township youth menace that was variously deployed across the political spectrum (Cowell 1990;
Macleod and Hawthorne 1991; Ramphele 1992; Seekings 1996; 2014) and continues to echo today. The common version of this discourse is that the generation of youth that drove “liberation before education” school boycotts and campaigns to make townships ungovernable in the wake of the 1976 uprisings were socialized in violent streets rather than classrooms, and as a result, became the primary threat to their communities and indeed to a new South Africa premised on reconciliation. It seemed from his pause and redirection that Joseph reconsidered the fraught implications of this invocation, when he then extended the concept of “lost generations” back to colonialism and threaded it through to today, presenting it as a never ending loop of loss. While state-enforced colonial and apartheid deprivations drove earlier rounds of this loop, he attributes its ongoingness to the “internalization” of oppressions in the form of “low expectations.”

We started Launch in 2004 in Langa where, in the previous year, only five children had passed matric with a matric exemption which had maths in it78 from a baseline of 2000 students. So it’s that assumption, even in those schools, that these children can’t do it, it’s internalized oppression, an assumption that says... ‘Until we get more stuff, children won’t be able to succeed. Until children transition into middle class, they’re doomed. There will be another lost generation.’...The expectations are low if you look at impoverished space, go into Diepsloot, expectations of those children are low. Even when they’re doing extra lesson programs, it’s at a level to patch brokenness.

According to Joseph, Launch exists to stop the loop of losing generations, now driven by the “low expectations” he describes as endemic to poverty. His mention of both Langa, the site of Launch’s oldest school, and Diepsloot, where a Launch alumnus helped establish a school in 2011, is important to this argument. While low performance in Langa schools has direct, undeniable links not only to apartheid spatial engineering, but longer-standing colonial white supremacy in South Africa (given its establishment in 1927), Diepsloot is a post-’94 township...

78 Bantu Education denied higher level maths and science courses to Black learners. Many township schools continue to offer only maths literacy and not mathematics, a requirement for many courses of university study.
north of Johannesburg that represents the reproduction of these arrangements in a democratic
dispensation. It was established in 1995 as a temporary relocation for people evicted from
informal settlements in surrounding areas, but has now expanded to over 350,000 residents.

During a visit to Diepsloot months earlier, when I toured the construction site of what would be
Launch’s first facility to be built from the ground up, Joseph described the school as “proving
what’s possible in probably the most broken community of our country…there’s no infrastructure,
there’s no pre-planning, there’s no good road system, everything is informal. It wasn’t there
before 1994. It should not exist. So there’s a critical symbolism to defining this new space.” Yet,
rather than emphasize how the living legacy of apartheid drives ongoing material injustice like
land and infrastructure inequity in housing and schools, in turn shaping teaching and learning, he
asserts that higher expectations can remedy “brokenness” in the schools of Diepsloot, Langa,
and other poor communities across South Africa. Returning to the question I posed to the group
—“why does Launch exist?”—Joseph doubled down.

> Launch is a political statement and a human statement, that children, regardless of the
socioeconomic context, can and will succeed when given the right expectations, the right
caring framework. There’s the assumption. I think it’s proven. We lose it a bit because we
think ‘everyone knows that now’, but most of our country doesn’t know that.

This line is straight out of the “no excuses” playbook that has circumnavigated the globe
as neoliberal education reform doctrine. Poverty and racism are no excuse; youth navigating
them can and will succeed regardless of their socioeconomic contexts if only someone raises
their expectations. Expectations are the paramount lever of change, not material circumstances—
the latter, youth can lift for themselves if their newly heightened expectations yield a win in the
rigged “quest” Thandiwe described earlier. This logic illustrates the violence of aspiration as
neoliberal imaginary. The logic is that youth, despite the constrictions of hostile atmospheres, simply need a heightened capacity to direct their breath toward a tenuous goal of social mobility, rather than less harsh climates in which they can breathe free. The problem was never children’s capacity or their communities’ expectations. The problem was and is systems of racial capitalism premised on the violence of inequality. Of course children from any context can “succeed,” but at what cost for children who have to shoulder violence while doing it? Who exactly needs proof and what agenda does proof serve? What can proof of success within the status quo do besides distract urgency from the need to change it? Why focus on proof of what’s possible instead of the unjust probable that remains far more likely no matter how many boutique schools open and how many agents of change they produce? There will never be enough escape hatches for everyone.

At this point, Kirk, a fundraising specialist who described himself as “a person of color” stepped in to push on Joseph’s assertion that Launch’s work of proving impoverished children can succeed if “given the right expectations” is “a political statement.” Similar to Anathi, Kirk expressed that the school had more to do in terms of political education. He suggested that Launch, despite the limits of its structure, could be more intentionally using its position to amplify understandings of inequity. “Launch’s existence exposes the inequity in the system, but we need to assume a social justice agenda that makes these inequities public. There’s a lot of work to be done in that area and in that sense our mission is not accomplished.” Adriaan, his colleague of Afrikaner background who works on project management, agreed. “I think it’s a question we need to seriously consider, how we take forward the work we do on behalf of and with marginalized children. That may have much more overt political implications of addressing power imbalances.” It’s here that Joseph explicitly acknowledges that a politics focused on
individuals as the central drivers of change is part of Launch’s DNA. He confesses anxieties about embracing approaches more oppositional to structural problems or more focused on activating collective mobilization, unless under the rubric of a “positive” politics.

*Launch has had a conscious focus on the politics of identity—who am I and who do I need to hold out as my role model? We’ve focused on young people becoming role models of what can be achieved. There’s a clear political agenda in creating role models who will have an impact on society. A much more high risk element is social movement. We’re developing connectedness across a spectrum of platforms with a view to creating positive social movement. Most social movement works against something, it’s very difficult to mobilize a social movement which is pro a model of change, something good. ‘We are building this social movement because we are agents of change, not because we’re going to destroy something.’ So we’ve taken on the tough task, but we haven’t been coherent in that even though we’ve worked relentlessly. It’s interesting how young people from Launch when they land in universities, land BIG. Students like [names Mpumelelo and others] who’ve been SRC members and got into the #FeesMustFall campaign and tried to hold values in an incredibly complex, sometimes valueless framework, but they’re emerging with integrity and a sense of self.*

Pearl, a management consultant from the US who has coached Launch leaders since 2014, supported Joseph, proclaiming, “every one of your alumni is a political statement.” She affirmed Launch’s focus on “moral development and giving back” as “what positive politics is all about.”

Much to my chagrin, Pearl imbued this claim with authority by drawing from the holy grail of liberal aphorisms, citing the alleged words of an American anthropologist. “I mean, Margaret Mead said, ‘never expect anything but a small group of individuals to make the change.’”

While some critical students and alumni portrayed Launch as apolitical, this discussion illuminates the character of the organization’s political agenda and the debates surrounding it. The assertion of a “politics of identity” based on “role model” creation and the claim that each individual graduate is a “political and human statement” expresses a politics of liberal humanism/humanitarianism that undergirds Launch’s founding and theory of change. This is
explicitly laid out in the school manual’s assertion that Launch abides by “the moral, ethical and humanitarian principles common to most recognised religions or humanist schools of thought.”

While the liberal humanism that undergirds the modern state forcefully exported through European conquest has been centrally concerned with the individual and his capacity and agency, this section of Launch’s manual also attempts to subsume African humanisms within a purportedly universal liberal humanist approach by asserting that the school’s “core value” is an “ubuntu” conception of “interconnectedness,” now somehow compatible with market-oriented reforms like privatization and user fees (McDonald 2010). At stake more broadly in these claims and the discussion they generated are competing conceptions of what constitutes “justice” and what kind of violences are recognized in trauma-informed approaches, especially since Launch frames its schools as social justice–oriented healing interventions to address South Africa’s open wounds. Anathi interrogates this framing when she calls out Launch’s suppression of conscientization, pointing out the impossibility of healing without becoming conscious to the past and present conditions that shape students’ traumas. Kirk pushes this further, asserting that Launch must adopt a “social justice agenda.” It is worth noting that even figures often cited as paragons of an increasingly contentious vision of a “rainbow nation” forged through reconciliation have insisted that healing is impossible without justice. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, quoted multiple times in Launch’s manual, captures this in his description of competing conceptions of justice, “there is another kind of justice, restorative justice, which was characteristic of traditional African jurisprudence. Here the central concern is not retribution or punishment. In the spirit of ubuntu, the central concern is the healing of breaches, the redressing of imbalances, the restoration of broken relationships…” (1999, 54-55) Even in this
reconciliatory exemplar of what Joseph and Pearl called “positive politics,” interpersonal healing is premised on material repair, the “redressing of imbalances.” At the other end of the spectrum, Joseph renounced oppositional social movement, movement that wants to “destroy something” and, by implication, placed #FeesMustFall/#RhodesMustFall and its purportedly “sometimes valueless framework” in this category. His anxiety about the risks of “negative” movement—the #Fallist impulse to burn it all down—is illuminating. By contrast, Launch’s pedagogies of aspiration, which frame individual success within the status quo as the appropriate road to social justice, “educate the desires of both young people and educators to conform with a notion of justice that is deeply compatible with the existing social order” (Shange 2019, 56).

As we wrapped up this gathering, team members expressed appreciation for working in a rare environment where a group as diverse as theirs could manage schools together, let alone have difficult, open dialogue in the manner they just had. Small talk ensued, but a subtext surfaced that completely drove home the stakes of our discussion. While comments thus far had portrayed racism as matters of feelings and expectations, this subtext yielded the only explicit discussion of structural racism in our dialogue. Kirk mentioned a WhatsApp message from his son reminding him that it was Guy Fawkes Day,\footnote{Guy Fawkes Day is an imported British holiday commemorating a failed plot by Catholics to bomb Parliament and kill King James I. It is celebrated in South Africa with fireworks and costumes but also destructive behavior and vandalism.} so the few teachers and students that showed up to his son’s school were all in one room watching a movie. Amidst audible exasperation (one colleague lamented “that’s colonialism for you!”), Natalie, who hadn’t said much in the main discussion, spoke up “just to reflect.” She had recently moved to a formerly “White” area, and confessed that she was grateful not to be living in a “typical Coloured area” like where she grew up.
up—where she had always feared being attacked on Guy Fawkes Day, where her brother’s car was vandalized that morning. Natalie explained that when she started school in 1994, the year of the first free elections, her parents sent her to a previously White school that she did not enjoy “because it was a good thing just to say that’s where you were.” She hated admitting “stereotypical feelings” of being safer in her new neighborhood, “White people’s space.” But her tone shifted when she mentioned learning from a book she was reading that her new neighborhood was not a “White” area until apartheid. The author detailed her family’s 1960s forced removal from their large home with gardens and stables to a matchbox house in the sandy “Coloured” designated township of Bonteheuwel (directly adjacent to Langa) because “White people were coming to take the space.” Joseph spoke up softly with a confession of his own, “My family moved into that area in 1970.” After a brief silence, Kirk simultaneously heightened and diffused the tension with a joke that elicited laughter, “So, you’re the culprit.”

Not only are past wounds open, in need of redress, but racist displacement and spatial injustice is ongoing, for example, in the City of Cape Town’s armed Anti–Land Invasion Unit that evicts informal settlement dwellers and demolishes hundreds of people’s residences and possessions monthly. The framing of poor Black people’s attempts to make spaces to live amidst gross inequality as “land invasion” in a country built on centuries of white land dispossession is a daily violence that affects many Launch students. Launch’s approach to healing woundedness places individual striving at the center in a trickle-down understanding of justice. School annual reports put this explicitly. They detail the state of the growing alumni network, lingering particularly on new “firsts”—“first engineering graduates, first honours graduates, first masters student, first graduates working at blue chip financial services firms.” In an early report when
the school hit 30 university graduates, there was a reiteration of the overall theory, “Our original vision was that community change can only come through personal change and the way Launch students have taken ownership of becoming agents of change in their communities has been quite amazing. What began as a trickle has become a flow...our hope now is that this flow becomes a flood.” Critical voices like Anathi and Kirk challenge this approach. Rather than forward healing as a trickle from heightened capacities to aspire, trauma-informed approaches must unlock conscientization of shared conditions that shape traumas as well as collective capacities for intervention. Relational elements latent in LO circle and lessons from popular education spaces beyond schools provide a way forward.

3.6 Breathing Together: Toward a Capacity to Conspire

Aspiration is breath work. As I have shown, it is both life-saving and violent in the context of racial capitalism. Yet, this chapter opened with a different kind of breath work, the most powerful practice I witnessed at Launch on a daily basis—people (young and old, student and teacher) pausing to breathe together. There is a precise word for breathing together: conspiring. Launch attempts to achieve “social transformation” through the “personal transformation” of youth, unleashed by trauma-informed pedagogy. Though this model helps young people surface and manage painful affects so they can better aspire toward middle class ambitions and individual change agency, it does not harness the powerful relational aspects of LO circle toward critical consciousness and mobilization. While scholarship across contexts has taken up educational efforts to address disparities in what Appadurai (2013) calls the “capacity to aspire,” insights from popular education beyond schools, as well as critical perspectives shared
by interlocutors, point to education’s alternative potential as a site where youth can develop what I call a “capacity to conspire,” or breathe and act collectively toward radical transformation.

Anathi’s use of the word “conscientization” to describe what was missing in Launch’s approach was not coincidental. She participated in a “youth consciousness movement” (YCM) formed by people in her neighborhood when she moved back to the township after university. When asked to recount her most formative educational experience, it was telling that she named an experience from this context, not from her formal schooling. She was invited by a friend to join a grassroots collective focused on critical issues affecting the community. People of all ages were welcome; “youth” was more an indication of a leaderless structure. The title was a nod to the antiapartheid Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) birthed by the South African Students Organization, which drew on the work of Pan-Africanist struggles and Paulo Freire to promote community-based pedagogical projects as means of conscientization, or “development of self-awareness and then awareness of the world” (Naidoo 2015, 123). BCM activists understood conscientization as a means of both countering the destructive psychological effects of racism and generating collective action upon a racist society to transform it. Anathi described the YCM similarly, as a “youth movement that had an impact on how I see things now—how I see myself and how I see the world.” She contrasted the latter element to Launch’s LO, which in her perspective stopped at the former. “We challenged ourselves to learn the history that we didn’t get in school and how it connects to current issues—land inequality, capitalism, the kind of food we are consuming.” This was done through discussion groups, film screenings, and sharing texts.

Obviously it’s not like we had answers to everything, but it was a space where we shared information about historical events and knowledge about us people as Xhosa-speaking or Nguni people or Black people and the kinda impact as young people we could have in our
society. I started reading more, especially biography books, not necessarily just about apartheid or South Africa, but views from African people. We didn’t have solutions or a way out, but the process was to learn, conscientize each other. It required a lot of research, even asking your people when you go home in December, making sure that you learn as much as you can when you are there.

In their attempts to take concrete action, they struggled to identify a focus because of the volume and interconnectedness of issues. Inspired by their studies of the Black Panther Party’s “survival programs,” particularly free food distribution, and Julius Nyerere’s Ujamaa model of cooperative economics, they began a “guerilla gardening” initiative of converting a piece of land being used as dumpsite into an unfenced communal garden, proclaiming that “Food cannot be commodified. Food is free because umhlaba ngowethu.” The garden project was short-lived, however, because the provincial government seized that plot to build houses, which Anathi described as both urgently needed and illustrating the complexity of land inequality, since people were also evicted from informal settlements in the area in the name of housing development.

The YCM pivoted to another pressing issue: sanitation, yielding Anathi’s most formative lesson. She described the area surrounding the hostel where she lived as “very dirty,” explaining that sewage often runs openly and people routinely empty waste in the streets. “After all, they don’t have anywhere else to throw dirty water or trash because many people live in shacks, there are not enough rubbish bins and, there’s a whole lack of service delivery.” Lack of service delivery frequently sparks protests in Langa, sometimes turning violent, as in 2016 when the post office was burned down. This came up on a few occasions at Launch in the context of school cancellations due to students’ inability to walk to school safely or staff who lived outside of

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80 The land is ours.

81 Though the Langa garden was short-lived, the guerilla gardening initiative spread to Khayelitsha, another township in Cape Town, through one of the project’s leaders (Hogg 2017).
Langa not being able to enter. I would receive a WhatsApp that simply read “service delivery protests” (once accompanied by an image of people burning tires) as a signal not to come to school, but I did not observe forums for deeper student engagement with the politics of these events in the aftermath. With YCM, Anathi was able to engage critically with their causes and act with others. They began a routine of cleaning streets they were familiar with within two neighboring zones while using social media to call out city officials on lack of sanitation service.

You know the vibe, when the streets have this kinda fresh air because everyone is working together toward something good? It had that effect within our community. What I really enjoyed was seeing young people participating in cleaning the streets. People I didn’t think would hang out with us or participate in such things started picking up brooms. It became a huge thing where people in the community even started giving us money to buy cool drinks because most of the time it was really hot. Then people started talking to each other. There was this vibe. At one point we cleaned a blocked drain and I tweeted the whole thing and I actually dissed Cape Town City and tagged them because those things are reported to the municipality and they do not take the initiative to fix the problems. But then they came and actually fixed the drain after that. That street was clean for like the longest time and people stopped throwing stuff there.

Anathi’s stunning proposition that “working together toward something good” generates “fresh air” points to the potential of conscientizing pedagogy to activate a capacity to conspire. As she tells it, their working together had created breathing room in a space she previously described as intentionally not designed for humans. This was not the breath work of aspiring toward individual success or toward beating brutal odds, an endeavor that claims lives even as it ostensibly saves them. This was the breath work of conspiring toward a shift in the shared conditions. Although this victory was short-lived—Anathi moved out of Langa and the collective eventually fell apart in the face of internal conflict—she described the experience as lastingly altering her way of seeing. This is the distinction she highlighted when I suggested that her experience of YCM sounded very similar to social development at Launch. As described in the
previous chapter, Launch’s goal of “social transformation” is also supported by its requirement for students to participate in community-based social development projects.

Social development was important because it helped me discover that I actually enjoyed taking responsibility in my community, but it was not consciousness, it was just “giving back to the community,” it was more like charity. It was different from the youth consciousness movement. I don’t think it helped children see anything differently. It didn’t help me see the things I saw through the movement.

There is one thing that many, including Anathi, did report seeing for the first time through LO circles: the widespread nature of trauma. While this has yet to be extended into efforts to prompt awareness of the political structures that shape this prevalence, it is still a significant step. The element of Launch that initiates this revelatory process is its prioritizing of a relational framework. This framework’s transformative power rests not only in promoting resilience or regulation, but in refrains I heard often: “Be a mirror.” “Who can relate?” Alumni reported continuing the work of reflecting long beyond their time and relationships at Launch, signaling a strength of their model that they might harness more directly in service of activating the more critical “seeing” Anathi describes, as well as a capacity to conspire toward change. Even Mpumelelo, always ready with sharp critiques, noted the relational framework as a clear strength of the model, with impact that extends beyond the walls and five years of Launch.

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It’s funny, you will find someone from matric that would randomly send you a message on Facebook—it happened two months ago actually—an old classmate sent me a message saying “Mpumelelo, I think you’ve been seeing me and this is what has been happening in my life. Please reflect for me.” So now we have made that a thing—Reflect for me. Ask me what’s going on in my life, I want to tell you this.” That will happen over Facebook or WhatsApp or in person or whatever. And that impact really is important. Now I’ve even introduced that to other people that are not from Launch. And she made it clear in that message, “Tell me like it is, like we are in the LO circle.”
I have observed trauma-informed approaches that employ breath work and mindfulness in many schools and educational contexts beyond Launch, in both South Africa and the United States. They are only becoming more common as attentiveness to trauma grows in the context of the COVID19 pandemic. Yet, as I have learned through interactions at Launch and in the larger context of Cape Town, there are different types of breath work. The power of breath can be directed toward a personal transformation that facilitates individual aspiration, or also toward activating a consciousness of the world that unlocks capacity to conspire toward more just conditions. Even the life-affirming power of breath risks being commodified and deployed toward reinforcement of the status quo if framed as merely an instrument to bolster resilience. This risk is heightened if Black youth’s enhanced endurance of unjust conditions is then packaged as “transformation.”

Critical scholarship in anthropology and education scrutinizes recent initiatives that frame “character education” as a key lever of social and emotional learning intervention for Black youth, promoting racially coded and compliance-based programs that teach children how to exhibit “grit” as a solution to educational inequality (Camfield 2015; Love 2019). Bettina Love (2019) has argued that “Measuring dark students’ grit while removing no institutional barriers is education’s version of the Hunger Games. It is adults overseeing which dark children can beat the odds, odds put in place and maintained by an oppressive system” (73). Yet, Love praises trauma-informed approaches, including mindfulness and therapeutic interventions, as the antithesis of anti-Black programs of character scoring, arguing that “Dark students, especially those who have experienced toxic stress, do not need their grit measured or their character

82 Love's use of “dark” draws on W.E.B. Du Bois’s assertion in “Criteria of Negro Art” (1926) that, in the US context, “We who are dark can see America in a way that white Americans cannot.”
examined...They need culturally relevant therapy that teaches age-appropriate stress reduction practices” (74). While character education programs like KIPP’s character growth card that involve measuring and scoring students’ social and emotional learning do differ greatly from trauma-sensitive approaches that promote collaborations with providers of social and psychological services to support students, it is striking that, upon closer examination, both approaches actually rest on the same core premise: schools, particularly those serving Black students in poverty, should build resilience and promote emotional regulation. While resilience can be life-saving, as Launch students attest, it can also reify violence if decoupled from attempts to help youth understand and intervene on the conditions that require it. Furthermore, if the definition of “trauma” underlying these approaches continues to be solely event-based and past looking, overlooking the everyday trauma of racial capitalism, then they will amount to nothing more than a softer version of “grit.”

At stake here are larger questions about education’s role in radical change. On a survey I administered to Grade 12 students at all six schools, I asked “What is the most important thing you learned at Launch?” One student’s response captured Launch's theory of change: “Transformation within yourself before transforming the world is indispensable.” I thought long and hard about this striking response. While Launch can be pushed to extend its work on individuals and their interiority toward critical consciousness of the larger society, it is also true that social movement contexts that center political organizing can benefit from a simultaneous grappling with the internalization of violence at the level of individuals, given it is often reproduced interpersonally within their ranks. This reproduction is illustrated, for example, by KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) is a US-based organization of charter schools. The relevance of this organization’s work to my research at Launch is discussed in greater depth in Chapter 4.
reports of gender-based violence within antiracist and anticapitalist student movements and even within radical organizations politically organizing high school youth (Heinrich Böll Foundation 2019; Xaba 2017). But what Launch poses with its idea of personal transformation as the road to social transformation is a sort of two-stage theory, where one is presumed to follow automatically from the other, without equal attention. In her writing on the role of radical pedagogy in the Black Consciousness Movement and lessons from their work, South African education scholar Leigh-Ann Naidoo (2015) proposes always holding the two together, rather than in contradiction: “engaging in the transformation of society through education, [requires] working at both the individual and collective levels rather than prioritising one over the other” (129). This is a bolder premise for future iterations of a trauma-informed Life Orientation at Launch and for all educators working in schools and beyond toward radical change.
Interlude: The Nervous Conditions of Antiracist Schooling

Near the end of the 2018 school year, Mandla, the only Grade 12 student that declined participation in my research, decided he was interested in joining the sixth and final (un)focused group. While about half the students had to get permission from a guardian to participate, Mandla was one of the students of consenting age that made the decision independently. Because we had met years prior when I worked with one of his Grade 8 instructors, he still greeted me and chatted occasionally, but I generally avoided him so as not to violate his decision.

One day Mandla stormed out into the courtyard from a matric class meeting with the principal, a Launch alumna from his community. He seemed pretty upset. Noticing me going through some notes, he walked up and asked if it was too late to participate in the research. I told him he was welcome to join the next unfocused group and asked if he was OK. His response took aim at the school’s tagline and mission, “This thing of Launch ‘building tomorrow’s leaders,’ I don’t buy that story. They are just telling us they are building future leaders, but in the end we are told how to lead and, if you are telling someone how to lead, you are not actually building leaders.” It was clear he saw my research as a platform to air grievances, but I welcomed the input, recognizing grievances as important sources of insight into the space.

The following week, ten Grade 12 students, including Mandla, gathered with me for what stretched into a ninety-minute after-school conversation. Mpumelelo also attended to take notes. Mandla did not speak for almost the entire session, which seemed odd after our previous encounter. At the very end, as we were wrapping up and reflecting on takeaways from the discussion, he addressed his peers with only a question. “There’s something I want to rectify. It’s not something much, yabo? Is Launch a Black school or White school?” This elicited intense
vocal and body language reactions from his peers including shouts of “Haibo!” and “What do you mean?” Mandla continued, “It cannot be a Black school but you know, our manufacturers are White. It’s a White school but it’s sugarcoated.” There was nervous laughter. Glances were shot in all directions. Even Mpumelelo let out a low-pitched “Eeeehhh.” It was clear some sort of protocol had been breached. Mandla’s classmate Xolisa retorted “Ah-ah what makes a school a Black school or a White school?” Thandiwe responded, “The students.” Xolisa affirmed, “Ewe, the students!” It was settled then. Because of Launch’s all Black student population and, I might add, its majority Black teachers and school-facing leadership, many of them alumni, as well as its recent controversial relocation from a formerly white neighboring community to which it had bussed students for years into the township it served, it was a “Black school.” But Mandla made one more attempt at his case, in the form of another question, this time followed by an answer “Who wrote the manual? Mr. Joseph.

Mpumelelo and I had been attempting to hang back most of the session to let students direct the conversation’s course. Launch students are used to having open-ended, in-depth discussions because of the school’s previously described LO circles where students are encouraged to boldly “confront issues” and engage “difficult conversations.” Despite our hands-off facilitation, Mpumelelo was moved to intervene.

_This discussion is important to instigate a culture of questioning the institution that you exist within. Dissecting it, and looking at—what is it creating of you? Going out into the university world, you’re going to have to challenge all these structures. So that ties to your question. I mean, you need to understand that you are Black children coming from the township. And like you asked, or I guess I would tie it to your question, is Launch a missionary school? Those of you who do history know that missionary schools existed in South Africa prior to apartheid and sometimes during apartheid with Western people coming to educate “Natives” and that did “Natives” a great great violence and a great_
great malice. That system was there to shape them to become certain kinds of people in society. For them there was no other choice because it was an education of what they saw as superior. So I guess we have been through a similar experience. Not to say Launch is a missionary school, but it is a model that comes from a certain history.

While Black education under both colonialism and apartheid was shaped by white supremacy, Black communities widely understood and rejected Bantu Education as an education for subservience, whereas they had a much more fraught relationship to missionary education. Missionary education was characterized by the contradictory alliance of liberal ideals with racist reality, yet this contradiction drove the Black elite’s prominent role in anticolonial and antiapartheid struggle, producing some of its fiercest leaders (Comaroff 1996). Mandla’s question, “Is Launch a Black school or a White school?” and Mpumelelo’s reworking of the question into “Is Launch a mission school?” are instructive of how they understand the lineage of their school within the longue durée of white supremacy in South Africa: they can clearly link its neoliberal leveraging of social justice rhetoric in support a White-designed market model to the longer-standing contradictions of liberalism in South Africa. In the manual pointedly referenced by Mandla as written by Mr. Joseph, the White founder of the school, Launch’s mission is articulated as explicitly antiracist: “encouraging high aspirations in all our students... to reverse the social engineering of apartheid” (Launch Manual). Yet, however progressive its mission or however many Black faculty are employed, Mandla understands the school as a fundamentally White institution invested in shaping students into docile subjects who are “told how to lead.”

I pause in this interlude and think with the Black feminist interventions of anthropologist Savannah Shange and novelist and activist Tsitsi Dangarembga to theorize the stakes of this
exchange and the larger paradox of marketized schooling steeped in liberal progressive language of antiracism in post-Rainbow South Africa. In her 2019 ethnography *Progressive Dystopia: Abolition, Antiblackness, and Schooling in San Francisco*, Shange points to how the school operates as what Saidiya Hartman has termed a scene of subjection (101) facilitating Black subjects’ internalization of “invasive forms of discipline idealized as the self-fashioning of the moral and rational subject” (Hartman 1997, 140). While in the US context, this is easy to identify in no-excuses charter schools that employ zero-tolerance discipline policies, liberal progressive schools which mask pedagogies of respectability behind the language of decolonial liberation are where these invasive forms of discipline are most deeply internalized. In the text, Shange (2019) engages Black feminist fiction as anthropological resource, looking to Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*, as a “compass in rendering the progressive dystopia” (12). She approaches her site, Robeson Justice Academy in San Francisco, as a “coordinate in a global antiblack space,” connected to progressive dystopias from “New York…[to] Cape Town (82).

Taking us to the latter, I extend these inquiries on how “the territory of late liberalism is contorted into the map of social justice” (Shange 2019, 6) by drawing on student, alumni, and faculty anxieties about race in an antiracist-branded low-fee school as well as Tsitsi Dangarembga’s pathbreaking 1988 novel *Nervous Conditions* (recommended to me by an interlocutor) as anthropological resource to complicate liberal depictions of schooling and aspiration as means of accessing morally valorized social mobility in the wake of colonialism and apartheid. Popular portrayals of schooling across contexts are dominated by what Eli Meyerhoff (2019) has called “romance narratives of education” (11) that emphasize heroic triumph over oppressive conditions, or conversely failure, due to individual capacities and
choices. While Black-led student movements in South African basic and higher education have repeatedly called this romance narrative into question (Heffernan and Nieftagodien 2016), the institution of the school, despite its centrality in the colonial enterprise, is often deemed recuperable, especially in its most liberal iterations. Jean Comaroff (1996) has noted how mission education was a totalizing process of both instructing and reconstructing subjects by instilling “self-disciplined, self-conscious, self-motivated personhood” (31). Dangarembga’s novel (2004) takes direct aim at this instruction and at romance narratives of schooling, casting both in an ambivalent light by highlighting ruptures they introduce into the lives of Black youth and their intramural relations (Spillers 2018) and illuminating the “stakes associated with the making of a successful self” (Dangarembga 2020, 3).

*Nervous Conditions* is the first of three novels narrated by Tambudzai, a Shona girl who is thirteen years old when readers first meet her in 1968, in a rural village of White-ruled Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe. She seeks mission schooling to escape “the poverty of blackness on one side and the weight of womanhood on the other” (Dangarembga 2004, 16). The seed of this desire was first planted by her grandmother, who recounted the story of convincing White missionaries to prepare Tambu’s uncle, the first educated person in her family, for life in their world.

It was truly a romantic story to my ears, a fairy-tale of reward and punishment, of cause and effect. It had a moral too, a tantalizing moral that increased your aspirations, but not beyond a manageable level. My uncle...surprised the missionaries by performing exceptionally well at school, in spite of putting in a full day’s work on the farm. He was diligent, he was industrious, he was respectful. They thought he was a good boy, cultivatable, in the way that land is, to yield harvests that sustain the cultivator… My uncle became prosperous and respected, well enough salaried to reduce a little of the meagerness of his family’s existence. This indicated that life could be lived with a modicum of dignity in any circumstances if you worked hard enough and obeyed the rules. Yes, it was a
romantic story, the way my grandmother told it. The suffering was not minimized but the message was clear: endure and obey, for there is no other way. (Dangarembga 2004, 19)

The remainder of the novel unfolds as a takedown of this fairytale and a meditation on how breathing one’s life force toward a tenuous promise of social mobility fundamentally shaped by the violence of Whiteness—what we tend to call “aspiration”—is a risky endeavor that can threaten that very life force. Indeed, Tambu’s brother is left dead and her cousin has a psychotic breakdown after developing anorexia. Her mother is convinced it is schooling, and more precisely “Englishness” that has afflicted them, despite the fact that the mission school is now run by Tambu’s uncle, “the only African living in a white house” (1988, 63). Tambu, for her part, seems to embody the storied resilience required to navigate academic striving and its titular “nervous conditions,” a nod to Sartre’s introduction to Wretched of the Earth and Frantz Fanon’s theorization of the psychic violence of racism.

The nervous conditions of schooling were a repeated theme in my research. Joseph described Launch as a benevolent endeavor actually intended to alleviate exposure to nervous conditions by creating a context where Black youth from poor communities could access equal education without facing the violence of assimilation. Before establishing Launch, he taught in a Whites-only public school while coaching hockey and cricket in a neighboring township community. In the transition years of the 90s and early 2000s, he helped drive desegregation at formerly White public and private schools by facilitating bursaries for athletes he coached to institutions like Anglican and Forest High. In an interview, Joseph recounted a conversation with one of these students, now a chartered accountant and Launch supporter.

He said to me “I live in a perpetual state of Black nervousness.” I said “What do you mean Black nervousness?” He said, “I’m polished. I’m articulate. White people love to hear me,
they applaud me, I know exactly what they’re thinking. Then I go back to my family in Rustenburg and they have a nickname that I’m their White son. Which is meant to be praise.” He said “I know what that means historically and I know it’s not praise. It points to oppression and it points to the internalizing of oppression. And I have to live with that. So my nervousness at home is trying to be normal and my nervousness when I’m in the society dominated by White people is I’m not sure what to trust. Everyone assumes that I’m completely comfortable when I’m actually never comfortable.”

Joseph then reflected, I hadn’t heard it put like that, what he called ‘the nervousness of being Black’. And I was very conscious that I had participated in the former Model C schools where I taught in assimilation models and all this kinda thing, so the hypothesis for me was to disrupt the idea that the only success model was if Black children assimilate into a white school.” Joseph admitted his own participation in “assimilation models” during his previous teaching, but framed Launch’s model as explicitly attempting to disrupt this approach. He argued that “the assumption of Model C schools has been ‘we can take students from townships as long as’—they pass our tests, they match the basic standard of our current cohort.” Here, he was pointing to how historically White schools deploy a discourse of preserving their “standards” and established “ethos” in their attempts to maintain the dominance of Whiteness even as they desegregate. “Launch has given us freedom from that construct of White aspiration and allowed us to be creative. The space is freeing, but we still have to deal with the system, too.”

While Joseph used reported speech from a mentee to imply Launch is free from the assimilation imperative and serves as a sanctuary from “Black nervousness,” Mpumelelo, focused his debrief of our heated unfocused group on what he perceives as white anxieties about discussing race, which are then displaced onto Black students and faculty, including Bulelani, his former principal, a Black man from the township who also graduated from an elite formerly
White school with Joseph’s support. In the spirit of Launch’s focus on “finding your voice” and “building tomorrow’s leaders,” school community meetings are led by students on a rotating basis by grade, often fielding “difficult conversations” of relevance to the student body. When it came time for Mpumelelo’s class to lead, he proposed facilitating a discussion on race dynamics, not in the past or outside, but in the school and its “operations as a business.” The Black principal would not agree. Mpumelelo reflected,

At varsity I had to deal with the race question that I constantly have to ask myself and I also had to deal with the class question. But the class question when you’re talking about the problems of Black people is a result of the original one due to race and you can therefore see a very nervous rejection of certain issues, a nervous reaction of the upperclass, so I always made people uncomfortable by wanting to speak about race. I think Launch prepared me for that because I had already been dealing with those questions at the school. The race thing at Launch is very interesting in terms of there’s the main question of the founders of the school, you know, White guilt and all of that, and there is how the school has played out with reemploying the students as mere teachers, meanwhile in the top leadership, the board and external what-what, it’s more full of White people that no one knows about. But I raised this recently with a teacher, a Black teacher, and they were irritated. We are not supposed to talk about race for some reason.

Another alumna, Anathi, describes these anxieties as nothing more than evasion of the confrontation encouraged in Launch’s Code of Conduct. When we met up for an interview at her job, she pointed out some of the things that were “suppressed” at Launch, but discussed openly in her encounters with a radical youth collective in the township.

One thing we were very conscious about was land. That we needed land as Black people. Because our houses are like this in townships, while White people have a main house here and they have a guest house there and then there’s a huge swimming pool here and a huge yard or whatnot and they are living in peace and its not to say we want to live the same lifestyle as them, it’s just that we want a decent life. But most importantly we were conscientizing each other, making each other aware of the history of those things. The privilege that White people have through us as Black people. (her intoned emphasis)
Anathi makes an important distinction that she is not aspiring to a White “lifestyle,” but a “decent life.” To alleviate these nervous conditions, she calls for a conscientizing education that enables youth to ground their daily circumstances in a larger history and ongoing structural reality in ways that center the question of why Launch has to exist in the first place, as opposed to a liberal romance narrative of education that celebrates it as a sanctuary and savior.

There is debate about whether the education Anathi calls for can even occur in schools, given their function as ideological state apparatuses or, increasingly in the face of manufactured crises in public schooling, as market-driven entities implicated in enduring racial capitalism. To this question, late scholar and activist Neville Alexander (1990) argued, “Rather than vacate the schools and abandon a major terrain of struggle to conservatives and reactionaries, we have the task of transforming the terrain to suit our liberatory purposes” (22). Yet, he recognized that transforming the terrain requires actually having a liberatory purpose, which has not always been the case, even amongst those in liberation struggles, precisely because of the lure of romance narratives of schooling as a means to get ahead. Until the shifts of Black Consciousness, and the People’s Education movement that grew out of it, in the late 70s and 80s, he argued that anticolonial and antiapartheid activists across generations had been explicitly organizing for “an education that was equal to the education of Whites, the same education...as the Whites” (Alexander 2013, 107). In other words, an education for domination as opposed to subjection. This left the question of what an education for liberation actually looks like unanswered and has led to a schooling system still shaped by widespread aspiration to a “White education,” education for domination. Considering the reproductive functions of schooling, one
might argue this is a key driver of the larger perpetuation of racial capitalism even under a Black government, as the children of the ruling classes, now also Black and many with histories in liberation struggles, are typically the “right Blacks” (Hunter 2019, 133) admitted to and able to afford schools like Anglican. As Achille Mbembe (2014) argues, in a “new” South Africa, “processes of accumulation are happening, once again, through dispossession—except that this time round, dispossession is conducted by an increasingly predatory black ruling class in alliance with private capital, in the name of custom and tradition.”

I close with an interrogation of the dangers of a persisting desire for a “White education,” excerpted from an address at a 1986 Durban conference of the National Education Crisis Committee delivered by the late antiapartheid journalist Zwelakhe Sisulu, son of antiapartheid activists Walter and Albertina Sisulu. His call for a clear vision of “People’s Education,” issued on the tenth anniversary of the Soweto Uprisings, continues to resonate today:

What do we mean when we say we want people's education? We are agreed that we don't want Bantu Education but we must be clear about what we want in its place. We must also be clear as to how we are going to achieve this. *We are no longer demanding the same education as whites, since this is education for domination.* People's education means education at the service of the people as a whole, education that liberates, education that puts the people in command of their lives. We are not prepared to accept any 'alternative' to Bantu Education which is imposed on the people from above. This includes American or other imperialist alternatives designed to safeguard their selfish interests in the country, promoting elitist and divisive ideas and values which will ensure foreign monopoly exploitation. Another type of ‘alternative school’ we reject is the one which gives students from a more wealthy background avenues to opt out of the struggle, such as commercially-run schools which are springing up. To be acceptable, every initiative must come from the people themselves, must be accountable to the people and must advance the broad mass of students, not just a select few. In effect this means taking over the schools, transforming them from institutions of oppression into zones of progress and people's power. (1986, emphasis mine)
Chapter 4: Shareholder Schools: Policy Borrowing and Aspiration as Market Logic

Education experts from across South Africa and overseas agree that the time is now to fund alternative models that will meet the needs and aspirations of all young South Africans. In Launch and the other “no excuses” schools, we have the practical beginnings of a charter school system for South Africa. What is needed, agree the experts unanimously, is collaborative pressure to realise a funding model that will allow the system to grow and thrive.

—2013 News Report on Launch

“Government is giving up its own responsibility to #FixOurSchools!” A high school student holding a handmade sign peered down onto the Western Cape Parliament floor on a chilly August school night in 2018. She listened as members of the public expressed concern over a seemingly disparate package of proposed changes to education legislation in the Western Cape province that includes Cape Town, South Africa’s second largest city. These changes included allowing private and nonprofit entities to fund and manage the “turnaround” of low-performing government schools like hers. From her balcony seat, she hovered directly above representatives of an international foundation that won one of these contracts. Though no one from Launch was present that night, another one of the organizations that initially secured a contract, and later pulled out, was Launch. The hashtag on this student’s sign identified her as a member of Equal Education (EE), an activist movement of learners, post-school youth, parents, and teachers agitating and advocating for quality and equality in South African education (Brockman 2016). #FixOurSchools is a social media slogan for EE’s campaign demanding government attention to pressing infrastructure concerns in public schools serving low-income Black communities. Peers flanked this young activist, inching their signs toward the railing until
they noticeably hung over it, pushing their silent voices into the conversation. They were eventually removed by security. From the chambers below, I listened to voices of dissent. One parent placed the proposed policy within South Africa’s longer history of anti-Black schooling:

For far too long this anti-education department has tried to undermine the poor communities... Your colonialist, oppressive forefathers throughout history have tried everything in their power to destroy the future of Black people in this country by denying us access to a proper education!

Figure 11: View from the Western Cape Provincial Parliament floor during August 2018 public hearing on the proposed Western Cape Provincial School Education Amendment Act. Equal Education youth activists hold protest posters in the balcony above.
Despite overwhelming opposition that evening and at five previous hearings, the Western Cape Provincial School Education Amendment Act passed in November 2018. Provincial Education Minister\textsuperscript{84} Debbie Schäfer (2018) hailed the legislation as “the biggest public education reform since 1994,” attempting to frame it as an equity intervention by referencing South Africa’s first democratic elections, generally marked as the bookend of apartheid and its separate education based on racial categories. Initially, one of the amendment’s provisions allowing the sale of alcohol at events on public school premises received the most spirited media outcry, gaining it the nickname “the booze bill” (Felix 2018), but activists and scholars urged scrutiny of less publicized changes, including the law’s introduction of two new categories of “public” schools (Ally and McFarlane 2018; Black 2017; Madubedube 2018; Sayed et. al. 2017). “Collaboration schools” are managed by nonprofit “school operating partners” (SOPs) and “donor-funded public schools” receive private funding. A school may fall into both categories and in some cases the SOP is chosen by or is the donor. Collaboration schools include schools identified for turnaround as well as new schools opened under this category. The most controversial, far-reaching, and potentially detrimental element of the law is its restructuring of

\textsuperscript{84} The Western Cape context of this policy is noteworthy, as it is the only of nine provinces governed by the Democratic Alliance (DA), the official opposition party of the ruling African National Congress (ANC). The DA has tested South Africa’s semi-federal nature by relying on a constitutional provision that education is a matter of concurrent national and provincial legislative competence. This provision has been used to allow experimentation with reforms that simultaneously assert provincial autonomy and attempt to influence national policy to resonate with a global agenda of market-based solutions to public education delivery (Woolman and Fleisch 2009; Sayed and van Niekirk 2017; Equal Education 2018). Assertions of autonomy are also evident in the Western Cape being the only province to adopt its own constitution (subject to the national constitution) and refer to its Members of the Executive Council (MECs) of the province as “provincial ministers.” Yet the party also aspires for its reforms to spread beyond the province (DA Gauteng 2021).
school governing body (SGB) powers to grant SOPs or donors fifty percent or more voting representation on the SGBs of schools assigned to these categories by the WCED.85

SGB composition changes are contentious. National law reserves seats for parents, learners, teachers, and staff, with parents in the majority (Mansfield-Barry and Stwayi 2017). The South African Schools Act of 1996 (SASA) introduced SGBs to ensure local democratic governance in public schools, a dual result of generations of anti-apartheid struggle and transition era negotiations by the white minority government (Christie 1995; Vally 2007; Woolman and Fleisch 2009). Majority representation grants SOPs power to influence policies including hiring and firing, code of conduct, and language. Before the hearing, a Collaboration Schools Pilot Project (CSPP) to prove the model’s effectiveness had been running since 2016 in five schools, with Launch briefly serving as SOP for one of them. The 2018 amendment created a legal framework that will enable the model to be “scaled to support 10% to 15% of the Province’s public schools” (Gamedze 2019, 35). These “innovations” are modeled after United Kingdom academy schools and United States charter schools (Hares 2016; Hunter 2018; Zille 2016a), public-private partnership (PPP) models portrayed by the WCED as successes for education systems similarly riddled with deep-seated inequality, despite evidence that is inconclusive at best and significant debate in both cases (Baker, Wiley, and Libby 2015; Gillborn 2013; Junemann and Ball 2013; Scott 2009). Several of the CSPP backers are US- or UK-based, such as Ark, a UK charity and network of 39 schools, and the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation, a funder of KIPP and the Charter School Growth Fund in the US which also funds education public-private partnerships globally.

85 National law allows public schools to receive private donations and, within certain income quintiles, to charge fees. The provincial amendment distinction is that donors receive 50%+ voting influence over school governance.
In 2019, the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU), the largest teachers’ union in the country, and the Equal Education Law Centre filed motions in the Western Cape High Court challenging the constitutionality of the new laws, arguing that they will accelerate privatization and deepen inequality. They pointed out that in creating two new public-private categories of schools, this provincial legislation violates a constitution that was intentionally articulated toward a vision of rectifying the past, including in its clarity on the two types of schools: public and independent. Proponents of the law frame union and activist dissent as anti-improvement and anti-innovation, casting collaboration schools as a pragmatic response to an educational crisis. According to David Harrison (2017), CEO of the South African foundation DG Murray Trust and manager of the funder collective that backed the CSPP, “the South African education system is so dire, so destructive to the lives of millions of young people, that we must be willing to try new ways of doing things”. A wide range of voices took the floor that night—parents, teachers, activists, political parties, unions. One speaker captured a note of convergence from the dissent:

*The education of the working class child is not for sale to those who have money. The role of donors cannot be allowed to undermine organs of peoples’ power such as the school governing bodies. We fought to have SGBs in this country and we are not going to allow these powers to go to those who have money. We reject this notion of “shareholding,” if you like, that, because you have money, therefore you have a say.*

In this chapter, I argue that this “shareholding” policy illustrates how racial capitalism shapes the global circulation and local unfolding of market-based education reforms. I also zoom out from previous chapters to understand how Launch figures in the burgeoning of marketization in Cape Town’s unequal schooling landscape and in transnational scales of reform. Drawing on Cedric Robinson’s world-systems analysis of capitalism as a ubiquitously racialized,
interconnected global order (Robinson 2020) and Neville Alexander’s insistence that antiracism must be anticapitalist, particularly in the arena of education (Alexander 1983; 2013), I extend comparative and international education (CIE) literatures on “policy borrowing” (Steiner-Khamsi 2004; 2021) which attend to the politics of neoliberal globalization, but less frequently foreground racism as a global structure that shapes educational policy transfer. I engage methods of critical policy ethnography to both trace the multi-scalar racial politics of collaboration schools and offer a view from the ground where policy is implemented and contested.

Rather than evaluate the collaboration schools policy on the terms of policymakers, I situate it in larger historical and political processes, interrogate dominant policy agendas, illuminate the activity that goes into constructing problems strategically to fit these agendas, and attend to dissent. While I illustrate how notions of crisis and aspiration are deployed to frame market reforms, and their attendant deficit-based pedagogies, as both uncontestable and portable for racially marginalized communities globally, I also highlight how South Africa’s inextinguishable tradition of resistance to racial capitalism in and through education has been reignited against the contemporary neoliberal variant and its cunning market logics. This chapter answers calls for scholarship that attends to how global racisms shape the proliferation of neoliberal capitalist education interventions (Gerrard, Sriprakash, and Rudolph 2021; Sriprakash, Tikly, and Walker 2019; Walker, Sriprakash, and Tikly 2021) and for US scholars to more deeply engage with global educational struggles on behalf of Black lives (Strong 2018).

4.1 Critical Policy Ethnography: Studying Up, Down, Across, and Through

As a former teacher, my questions about the racial politics of transnational policy borrowing and my path to the 2018 Cape Town public hearing were sparked by my previously
described 2011 encounter with Bulelani, at the time the principal of a Launch school, when he visited the Newark charter school where I taught. He was a Fellow of World Village, founded by executives at US charter management organizations to “meet the global demand to learn from high performing charter schools in the United States” by “provid[ing] leadership training to education entrepreneurs looking to start schools for underserved communities in their home countries.” In a four-month program, fellows visited charter schools including Noble, Uncommon Schools, KIPP, Match, and High Tech High for training in data-driven instruction and teacher evaluation. The venture began with seed funds from the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation, enabling it to attract support from organizations like Teach For All, the global arm of Teach for America, and Relay, a teacher education program started by a collection of charter school management organizations. The goal was to establish a “global alliance” of “like-minded education organizations able to drive policy change at local, district and national levels in countries like South Africa, India, the United Kingdom, Brazil, and the United States.”

Just a few months before I met Bulelani in my classroom, Mark Zuckerberg’s visit to my school as a model of changes he envisioned with his infamous $100 million “gift” to Newark (Russakoff 2015) had increased my scrutiny of my employer’s enormous policy reach. Bulelani’s visit pushed me to consider this reach’s global nature and eventually led to my ethnographic research at his Launch school, and in Cape Town’s broader marketized education landscape. By the time I began conducting research in South Africa, he had moved on to teaching at a charter school in the United States and Launch had been enlisted to serve as an SOP managing the “turnaround” of a neighboring government school. The long-term nature and repeated visits of my fieldwork in Cape Town allowed me to follow the emergence and reception of the CSPP in
the local schooling landscape and Launch’s shifting involvement. My own embeddedness in education reform networks as a former employee of charter organizations in the US also offered me a vantage point and access through which to follow the broader transnational politics and linkages of the policy. In this chapter, I leverage both positions to offer a critical policy ethnography lens on how aspiration is deployed to help frame market interventions like collaboration schools as the only response to educational crises.

In attempting to understand the Western Cape province’s 2018 legal enshrining of collaboration schools, the policy flows that shaped it, and its appropriation and contestation on the ground—not as simply technical processes of policymaking, but as complex practices of power shaped by historical and contemporary forces of global racial capitalism, I draw on a range of critical qualitative approaches to education policy analysis (Bartlett and Vavrus 2014; White 2016; Levinson, Winstead, and Sutton 2017). While traditional policy analysis “focuses on ‘accomplished’ policy, in terms of actualizing intended goals on the part of policy actors,” critical policy perspectives encourage interrogation of dominant policy agendas and logics, of the larger policy climate, of the historical context that shapes policy, and of how the uneven and unintended impact of policy “aggravates or mitigates existing social inequality and relations of power” (White 2016, 14-15). Policy’s most common manifestation as discourses or texts couched in “objective, neutral, legal-rational idioms” (Shore and Wright 1997, 8) can obscure its highly political nature. As an anthropologist of education, I draw on practice theory (Bourdieu 1977; Ortner 2006) to approach policy as a practice of power. I employ ethnographic methods that “look beyond text to examine critically the ways in which official, top-down policy practices are negotiated, contested, accommodated, or transformed ‘on the ground’” (Levinson, Winstead,
This ethnographic approach to policy analysis necessarily requires multisitedness.

A policy as practice approach takes seriously the need for critical work that “studies up” and uncovers the strategies and mechanisms at work in elite, authorized policy formation processes. Such knowledge can then be circulated to democratic actors situated in other social domains, and in social movements, to foster greater accountability. Yet equally important is work that “studies down” to understand how marginalized…groups, not authorized to make official policy, nonetheless create policy variants through their appropriation of authorized policy. Finally, we must study “through” and “across” both horizontally and institutionally linked groups and organizations... (Levinson, Winstead, and Sutton 2017, 37-38).

Building on these insights, I study up, down, through, and across, and I add “back,” to account for engagement with histories that shape the context into which the collaboration schools model intends to intervene. The capaciousness of critical policy ethnography allows for a view of the racial politics of education marketization at multiple scales. Concretely, I offer a snapshot of the “life” of the collaboration schools policy through a series of vignettes. First, I “study through and across…linked groups and organizations” by detailing Launch’s engagements with charter schools, foundations, and think tanks across South Africa and the United States, as well as the role the organization came to play in driving Western Cape policy change by promoting the notion of a “missing sector” in South African schooling. Then, I “study up,” providing a glimpse of the policy implementation process by analyzing how a “sedimented common sense” (Levinson, Sutton, and Winstead 2009, 788) of “best practices” rooted in obfuscated racial logics permeated the authorized space of a CSPP-affiliated instructional workshop. Finally, I “study down” to engage how this common sense is challenged on the ground by local stakeholders, who illuminate and contest its racial capitalist underpinnings and propose alternative agendas for Western Cape policymaking. Critical policy ethnography can be a form of
engaged, action-oriented ethnography as the commitment to destabilizing dominant definitions and agendas and engaging alternatives brings a greater variety of voices into the deliberation process in ways that can democratize policy debates and challenge status quo formulae of resource distribution (Levinson, Winstead, and Sutton 2017). This potential resonates deeply in South Africa, where popular energies that sustained antiapartheid education movements are resurgent in collaborations between organizers and academics exchanging “tools to inform, direct, own and use research to claim a space in the formal policy arena and to demand accountability from state actors” (Vally 2020, 19).

4.2 “The Missing Sector”: Launch’s Ambivalent Role in Accelerating Marketization

As detailed earlier in the dissertation, Launch emerged out of a grassroots educational project with Pinelands and Langa teachers and students that ran for over a decade before its evolution into a school. In the shift to becoming a venture philanthropy–funded school “startup,” new demands arose. A central concern from the outset was “sustainability.” As described in Chapter 2, Joseph rejected the for-profit model of chains like Curro that sustain themselves on property portfolios paid for by families escaping a poor government system. Yet, he still faced the pressure of ensuring long-term financial viability beyond short-term seed investments. Joseph was initially funded to run Launch for three years by an impact investor started by a South African tech entrepreneur that asserts, “The holy grail for every funder is sustained impact—an approach continuing to influence behaviour positively long after your funding has run out.”

The ability to attract future funds to sustain a social impact venture, particularly in education, is often tied to assessments of “scalability.” This language of ventures and scaling is
precisely what distinguishes venture philanthropy, modeled on venture capitalist private equity investing, from older approaches to philanthropic grantmaking. “Grants become investments, programs are ventures, and measures of impact generally involve the ability to scale up an initiative” (Scott 2009, 115). Like venture capitalists, venture philanthropists want “return” on investments and are oriented toward market-based reforms and driving policy changes amenable to them (Saltman 2010; Scott 2009). In the US, this has led funders to be more attracted to branded school franchises like KIPP or Uncommon that consistently deliver high results on standardized exams, than to grassroots, locally grown, hard to replicate schools (Scott 2009).

Joseph and other teachers described Launch’s expansion as “haphazard, yet organic,” growing out of a genuine need for more schools across South Africa and driven by teachers and alumni with ties in other areas who served as “ambassadors” to establish new sites. As it grew, proof that “the Launch model” was scalable attracted funds from bigger players in global education reform, but also generated an imperative for standardization and systematization that threatened Launch’s ethos. The notion of an easily scaled chain approach is in direct tension with Launch’s emphasis on a relational framework and local embeddedness in the communities being served. Rather than continuously hustling for foundation and corporate social responsibility funds, Joseph envisioned that the model could reach sustainability by attracting full state subsidization. “We wanted the additional advantage of the government’s full subsidy, rather than a partial subsidy, which is effectively what charter schools get. We’d always said that if we can get to a point where the government will pay the full value of a child’s education at Launch, then

86 At the beginning of each school year there are typically large numbers of learners in the denser provinces who have not secured a school placement because of over-capacity. A Cape Argus cover story from Jan 18, 2018, the second day of the school year when I conducted research, focused on overcrowding in government schools and stated that 11,000 children in the Western Cape province still had not been placed in schools.
raising the additional funding is a more manageable task and the model is more scalable.”

Registered, nonprofit independent schools like Launch that charge low fees and serve poor communities are funded by provincial governments, but subsidies vary from year to year, with a cap at sixty percent of the equivalent per-pupil cost of government schooling. The quest to standardize operations across sites as they “scaled,” and the desire to attract full state funding, were drivers of a transnational alliance that caused a shift at Launch.

Victor, a former Launch teacher who began in 2007 when there were only two schools, and went on to help carry Launch’s emphasis on relational pedagogy into government schools through teacher education work, explained, “A huge turning point for the worse was when Joseph got connected with KIPP. It was a reorientation. He got connected with those people, whatever those guys’ names are, and went to the thing. Then they had the exchange where Bulelani went over for the leadership thing and we started to go down this KIPP road.” The “guys” are KIPP’s cofounders, and “the thing” is the KIPP Summit, an annual national convening of their employees. It was a story Joseph had vividly recounted to me several times, each time lingering on his discomfort and shock at the extravagance of a multimillion-dollar Las Vegas gathering where network leaders stayed in casino penthouses in the name of an organization focused on educational justice in poor communities. As with the Anglican exchanges described in Chapter 2, he approached it pragmatically, feeling that Launch could learn from the “systems orientation” of US charters, while not compromising their own ethos—and perhaps even share some of their approaches with those institutions. But, according to Victor, the relational framework suffered.
Joseph got convinced, rightfully so, that we were unorganized, and the only way to get organized is to do it like this. So we went from one extreme where it was a very laissez-faire, explore, human, try, community thing that was all about people, but self-correcting. When you create an environment that’s all about people, then the people self-correct, you know? But then you try to make that an American institution based on regimentation, now you’ve got problems. Then people get named COO and are ordained with institutional power. It was the worst of both worlds. We still have to be human-oriented but now there are tools that didn’t exist before. It was this flat hierarchy before, you walk into people’s offices and out. Now it’s like “You want a meeting, you have to schedule it through a thing.” These democratic things were no longer there. We grew and it was like, “Ok we need a framework for that, let’s look at a school system that has done that. Ok cool, we’ll do it like that.” And that really happened on one trip. He went to the States, came back and now things were different. And I get it. Especially at that time, KIPP was big.

One of KIPP’s hallmarks is a range of fellowships for “aspiring school leaders,” several of whom have gone on to start global education reform ventures. Several Launch teachers and principals traveled to the US to participate in leadership trainings with KIPP and a coalition of charter schools mentioned earlier, where I met two of them and first learned of Launch. KIPP cofounder Mike Feinberg also traveled to Launch and engaged with an association of twenty-three other South African “schools of choice.” This coalition hosted a high-profile convening advocating for “no-excuses” schools in South Africa, complete with a speech from well-respected education South African professor Jonathan Jansen, who invoked history to drive home the urgency of the educational crisis: “We made a promise to our children, all our children, in 1994—we dare not fail them.” Feinberg’s description of his impressions of South Africa epitomizes how the strategic deployment of aspiration as crisis response is used to bolster market solutions as uncontestable.

My impression is of an inspiring tragedy. It’s a tragedy because if you look at the current results, just 1% of black children are going to graduate from university. When you visit some government schools, you see why it’s 1%! But when you look at the children, they are beautiful and still have the same hopes and aspirations. So it’s also inspiring. They
have fire in their belly and song in their hearts. If only the adults can find ways to help these children achieve their aspirations—then the sky is the limit for South Africa.

Luckily, in his view, he was there to provide a way—charter schools. He pointed explicitly to the policy-borrowing motivations of his trip. “Thankfully, because of generous philanthropists like the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation we have found ways to connect two sides of the planet and help educators learn to start and grow schools of excellence here in South Africa.” The express purpose of the visit was to promote a US charter–style funding model, where full state per-pupil expenditures “follow the child” into nonstate schools, for the South African context.

While Joseph’s account of the Las Vegas summit portrayed Launch’s engagement with US charters as cautious pragmatism, the no-excuses convening in South Africa positioned the organization as a conscious policy advocate for privately managed, publicly funded schools. Launch also activated other alliances to this end, particularly with South African pro-market think tank the Center for Development and Enterprise (CDE). In her critical scholarship on “affordable” private schools in South Africa, Sonia Languille (2016) describes how the CDE gradually framed itself as the “most authoritative voice” (531) on low-fee schooling in the country, through the steady production of research reports extolling the expansion and increased subsidization of the private sector as the best way to ensure quality education for learners in poor communities, particularly in township settings (CDE 2010; 2013a; 2013b; 2015; 2016a; 2016b; 2021). These reports were regularly cited in South African media (John 2013; Pichulik 2012), despite their lack of peer review, explicitly pro-competition and choice agenda, corporate backing, and association with global drivers of education commercialization like Pearson (Languille 2016). Months after the no-excuses convening, the CDE released a Michael and
Susan Dell–funded report titled “The Missing Sector: Contract Schools: International Experience and South African Prospects” (2013a), which narrowed its advocacy to promotion of a model they called “contract schools,” named for the key feature that unifies charter-style reform across global contexts—a contract between the state and the private sector enabling the latter to autonomously manage “public” schools with state funding. The report advocated policy changes to establish an enabling regulatory environment, surveyed “evidence” of the model’s positive impact in 20 countries, and profiled organizations pioneering the model in South Africa, including Launch (CDE 2013a).

Discursively, the notion of a “missing sector” did a lot of mystification work. With it, the CDE was able to frame South Africa as lagging on an innovation that had taken hold all over the world, to purportedly positive effect for poor learners being failed by their governments. The report states, “There has been widespread international success in countries that have used this model to tackle schooling quality for poorer, disadvantaged communities” (2013a, 18). Amazingly, the “missing sector” device enabled the CDE to frame South Africa’s relatively small private schooling sector and high reliance and expenditure on public schooling—increasingly anomalous among other postcolonial contexts, where low-fee private schooling has mushroomed—as a shortcoming. “This type of public-private partnership is missing in the schooling environment, making South Africa one of few developing countries with a disproportionate reliance upon public schooling” (CDE 2013a, 18). The idea that there could even be a “disproportionate reliance on public schooling” in a democracy is mindblowing, particularly in the case of South Africa, where the unification and prioritization of a public schooling system, however bifurcated, was a direct attempt at redressing the legacy of apartheid by constitutionally
enshrining the state’s unqualified duty to fulfil everyone’s right to a basic education. The purposes of that right have been explicitly tied to the democratic project by the Constitutional Court: “The significance of education, in particular basic education, for individual and societal development in our democratic dispensation in the light of the legacy of apartheid cannot be overlooked” (McConnachie, Skelton, and McConnachie 2017). By strategically characterizing South Africa as an out of step “developing country” as opposed to a postcolonial, postapartheid democracy still in the making, the report is able to unceremoniously discard the country’s post-1994 commitment (however unfulfilled) to universal public education. Another argument the report relied on, which was echoed at Launch, was expediency—the bottom line that “contract schooling can have a more immediate impact than reform of traditional public sector schools” (CDE 2013a, 18). In interviews and conversations, students, families, and teachers generally expressed support for improving public schools and had keen analysis of how the rapid growth of low-fee private schools was in direct tension with that goal, but they needed better schools today, not tomorrow, and they had seized an opportunity to escape the system.

It turned out Launch’s vision of how contract schooling would play out was different from that of the Western Cape Government. The Premier and Education Minister were sold on public-private contract school idea, partially as a result of their own travels to the UK to be wooed by Ark, a network of 39 schools that has driven this model in the UK context, under the label of “academy schools” (Villet and Hares 2016; Zille 2016a). The 2018 passing of a provincial education law amendment enabling “collaboration schools” (note the rebrand), and the prospect that the model will spread to other provinces, are fruits of Launch’s lobbying efforts—and they were rewarded with a contract in the first pilot. A project manager representing the
collaboration school project’s funders even proposed Bulelani return from the US to lead a turnaround school. However, Launch’s vision was not to take over neighboring schools, but to secure full subsidization to run Launch. In fact, participation in the pilot sullied their longstanding relationships with educators in neighboring schools who were not pleased with the SGB restructuring and, as of the end of this research, they were still mending these relationships. As a result, Launch eventually pulled out. As Victor tells it,

*Launch was just trying to pay the bills. And then this project comes along with all these imported Ark ideas and these neocolonial approaches of “Let’s just tell these people who don’t know shit what to do.” It was just a disaster. And Launch was basically not complying from a mix of not wanting to comply and not really having the capacity to do that work.*

As it turns out, “turnaround” of a school several times larger, populated by the learners without scores or fees to access schools of choice, is entirely different work than running a small, selective institution.

As Joseph describes it, the vision and motivation for the prolonged lobbying efforts was to run autonomous, publicly-funded “schools of excellence,” operating as laboratories of innovation that would slowly trickle into neighboring public schools through a mixture of modeling, partnership, and competition. This narrative has driven cross-partisan support for charter-style reform across contexts—in the US, aligning Civil Rights and Black Power activist Howard Fuller with likes of Donald Trump and Betsy Devos; in South Africa, allying Black Consciousness activist Mamphele Ramphele with notorious DA politician Helen Zille (Hale 2021; O’Connor 2013). It has thus galvanized unlikely alliances of those driven by conservative agendas and education profiteering with those dedicated to getting Black youth a better

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87 This notoriety is partially due to incidents of Zille making racist comments on Twitter, detailed both in chapter 3 and later in this chapter.
education by any means necessary (Hale 2021; Mashego 2019; O’Connor 2013). It is not always easy to tell the difference. When assessing the impact, it is not clear that the difference matters, since the result is the same. In the end, these alliances, however ambivalent, further erode political will for fulfilling state mandates of public education, while positioning critical voices as soapboxers obstructing the aspirations of youth and families in low-income Black communities (Pichulik 2012).

4.3 “The Same Types of Communities”: Racialized Portability of “Best Practices”

In October 2018, I was invited to be an observant participant in an instructional leadership “boot camp” hosted at a hotel in Cape Town’s rapidly gentrifying Woodstock neighborhood. The invitation came from Insight, a South Africa–based teacher education startup partnering with US and UK organizations to deliver trainings for educators from the “most disadvantaged schools.” The workshop was attended by principals and teachers from government and low-fee independent schools in under-resourced districts (mostly in the Western Cape, but a few beyond) including those that house Mitchell’s Plain (township of Cape Town), Alexandra (township of Johannesburg), and Zithulele (rural village in the Eastern Cape). Ten of sixteen organizations represented were already participating in the CSPP as turnaround schools, new schools opened as collaboration schools, school operating partners, or donors. While the 2018 amendment describes an SOP’s role as “empower[ing] the governing body, school management team and educators at the school to develop systems, structures, cultures and capacities necessary to deliver quality education” (Western Cape Provincial Parliament 2018, 3), WCED has been criticized for vagueness on what this entails (Feldman 2020). A rare concrete component that Western Cape Education Minister Schäfer (2018) has shared is “providing more
professional development to our teachers and school leadership through this partnership”. The workshop offers a glimpse into the character of this professional development and the larger collaboration schools vision.

As we waited for the workshop to begin, I sifted through one of the binders placed at each seat, noticing language and strategies from the US no-excuses charters whose logos adorned the handouts being lifted into this context as “best practice.” I froze when I came to one on “Leading Student Culture.” In the center of the page was a photograph of a circle of Black children seated on the floor of a gymnasium, hands stretched in the air, eyes fixed on the teacher in the center. I instantly recognized the gymnasium. It was from a Newark elementary school in the network where I had formerly worked. Below the image, there was a quote attributed to a 2013 report from the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA):

“No only is a strong disciplinary climate consistently and strongly associated with better performance in mathematics across most countries, but improving the disciplinary climate seems to be a universally effective strategy to improve achievement. Looked at another way, an orderly environment negates the impact of income level on achievement.”

The workshop was primarily led by two facilitators who established their expertise by mentioning prior work with Ark in the UK and KIPP, TFA, and Relay in the US. We were told that these experts, who both named their “privilege as white men,” had had “front-row seats” advancing successful reform in places like South London and the South Bronx, which qualified them to coach educators on addressing educational challenges in South Africa’s Cape Flats. One facilitator mentioned expanding his previous work with KIPP in low-income urban US districts into a global education nonprofit that trains instructional leaders to “eradicate the educational inequities caused by structural discrimination in eight countries, including South Africa, Israel,
and the Dominican Republic.” He ended his introduction with dramatic flair, “We are education reform warriors. There’s a lot of places where the revolution hasn’t happened yet. Or it’s just starting. We’ve seen what’s possible. Watch out.”

Most of the workshop focused on discipline, managing teacher and student behavior, and helping youth “foster the intrinsic motivation to self-regulate.” Participants watched and analyzed clips from Doug Lemov’s bestselling book and video series, Teach Like a Champion: 49 Techniques that Put Students on the Path to College. First published in 2010 and now in its second edition, it is a manual and video catalog of a “new taxonomy of effective teaching practices” (Lemov 2010; xii) compiled from charter classrooms in “high need school districts in New York and New Jersey” (Lemov 2010; xv). The clips typically depict Black and Brown students being taught and drilled on routines like “tight transitions,” which involve passing out papers in under 10 seconds, and sitting in “SLANT” position (Sit up, Listen, Ask and answer, Nod your head, and Track the speaker). The manual, which includes strategies like “Radar/Be Seen Looking,” “Make Compliance Visible,” and “Engineering Efficiency,” emphasizes order, obedience, and surveillance as key levers for learning in “high-need” schools.

Before showing the videos, one facilitator offered context to the South African educators, “all of these clips are from disadvantaged, low-income schools in America.” Pausing for a moment, he asked “how do we say that here in a way that’s not negative?” When a few teachers called out to affirm “disadvantaged,” he continued, “Thanks. But yes, as you watch, don’t say ‘my school is so much worse, this will never work’. These are the same types of communities.” In a clip of a morning circle from a Newark elementary school, we watched students march around chosen peers holding flags adorned with university names and mascots. They chanted a call and
response led by a teacher: “*What do we have to do?*” “*Work hard all day long!*” as other

teachers monitored, commenting “*I’m checking*” and “*I can’t hear you.*” Next we watched a clip

not featured in the manual, from a low-fee independent school in a township of Johannesburg.

Founded by an African American woman who had taught in an urban US district and completed

a KIPP Global School Leadership Fellowship, the school’s first six weeks focus on routines and

procedures largely modeled on the behaviorist approach of *Teach Like a Champion*, but adapted

in name and flavor. For example, in the morning indaba (Nguni word that can be translated as

“meeting”) children line up outside the school chanting “*We got the knowledge to go to

college!*”88 as teachers conduct uniform checks. As images of tiny kindergarteners flash across

the screen, a school leader explains, “*our mission is to make sure students go to and succeed in

university.*” After the viewings, one facilitator reminded us, “*There is no small thing in a school.

Consistent routines and strong school culture eliminates the achievement gap.*”

In the workshop, there was a larger purpose offered for the strong emphasis on order,

obedience, discipline, and efficiency—aspiration. This was communicated through the metaphor

of “*escape velocity,*” thoroughly explained at the beginning of the workshop as the larger

motivation and stakes of no-excuses pedagogy, and signposted throughout. Escape velocity is a

physics term for the minimum velocity that a moving object (such as a rocket) needs to escape

from the gravitational pull of a celestial body (such as the earth) and launch into space (Merriam

Webster 2022). As someone researching aspiration and exploring it as a navigational capacity in

unequal urban space, this metaphor was striking in its amplified portrayal of aspiration as


88 This chant, created in the US, particularly illustrates the haphazard mismatch policy borrowing creates without

attentiveness to local context, given the differences between how “college” and “university” are used in South

Africa. Based on my understanding of this school’s mission and ethos, they were actually referring to “university.”
escaping one’s orbit to achieve liftoff into outer space. According to the facilitators, straight lines, tight transitions, and emphasis on surveillance, compliance, and efficiency all served this greater purpose of propelling kids from their conditions. At one point, they asked us to “turn and talk” with other participants at our tables, focusing on the question, “What do your kids need to achieve escape velocity? What’s it going to take for them to escape their orbit and launch?” I was eager to hear teachers’ takes on this metaphor’s implicit portrayal of schooling for Black youth as means of escape, but we never got that far because the strictly timed three minutes was over before we had all finished resharing our names. As the facilitator called us back, one woman declared in an exasperated tone, “This is the third time I’ve been cut off before I got to share and I’m honestly about to check out. So frustrating.” Even in a gathering of educators, the emphasis on efficiency and order had trade-offs. The uncontainable processes of dialogue and deliberation were not accounted for in this learning approach. Apparently, when educating Black kids from the “most disadvantaged schools” for “liftoff”, it was considered a necessary trade.

The “new taxonomy of effective teaching practices” (Lemov 2010; xii), highlighted in this workshop and circulating in the “global alliance” of “like-minded education organizations” that brought Bulelani from a township of Cape Town to my Newark classroom, are under increasing scrutiny in the US (Shapiro 2019) at the same time as they are being exported as panacea to educational inequality in South Africa and across the globe. Against the backdrop of a “crisis” discourse that relies in part on racialized images of “bad” teachers (Tompkins 2016), the orthodoxy of market solutions also “calls for reductive notions of practice-based teacher education defined by routines and positioned in contrast to theory” (Philip et al. 2019, 251). Teacher education has also been opened to market reform through the growth of independent
teacher academies that operate outside universities and promote prescriptive practices drawn from no-excuses charters emphasizing order and obedience. This “core practices” approach obscures structural injustice and legitimizes inequality by reducing teachers’ work to raising achievement on standardized measures.

Thomas Philip, Mariana Souto-Manning, and coauthors (2019) express concern about the “perceived portability and scalability of such approaches” (260). They argue that “Core practices as a market-based, neoliberal teacher education reform may come to represent another globally traveling teacher education reform, such as Teach For All, which fails to account for the particularities of local context, let alone national and regional contexts, and their unique histories of oppression” (253). Despite scholarship pointing out how the pedagogies of obedience and order that undergird these core practices carry on persistent, racist “culture of poverty” notions that attribute inequality to the “culture” and behaviors of marginalized people (McDermott and Vossoughi 2020), and growing evidence that these approaches have detrimental effects in communities where initially implemented (Golann 2021), they traverse the globe as “best practice.” This suggests that the perceived portability of these pedagogies, captured in the facilitator’s insistence that “these are the same types of communities,” rests not on objectifiable measures of effectiveness in facilitating “learning,” but on racialized notions of what types of schooling are suitable for marginalized youth worldwide in the unequal landscapes produced by global racial capitalism.

A critical insight of educational anthropology research is that “education is always about learning personhood in relational worlds” (Abu El-Haj 2020, 7). This learning is shaped by the inequality of relational worlds in which it unfolds. Drawing on Charles Mills’s depiction of the
social contract in liberal democracies as a “racial contract” (1997), Abu El-Haj argues that, despite a globally salient myth that schooling solves inequality, across time and space schooling and its attendant fictions like “success” and “failure” (Varenne and McDermott 1998) serve political roles of demarcating who is and isn’t deserving of full personhood. No-excuses pedagogies prepare racialized youth for a “subpersonhood” associated with marginalized positions in society.

No excuses charter school networks that “train” children to adhere religiously to rigid classroom routines and discipline are (if, arguably, unconsciously) preparing racially minoritized and low-income children for what the philosopher Charles Mills has pointed out are forms of “subpersonhood” (Mills 1997). They are being taught embodied forms of citizenship that privilege obedience to authority over critical engagement and challenge to the unjust status quo, thus, creating the conditions for yet another cycle of educating racially minoritized children for marginalized positions in public life. (Abu El-Haj 2020, 8)

This process is at times alarmingly explicit. In Teach Like a Champion’s first edition, Lemov favorably compared the norm of 100% compliance 100% of the time to the infamous “broken windows” theory of policing. In the 2015 edition, after this theory was attracting more scrutiny as racist and linked to mass incarceration and police violence in Black communities, these references were removed (Treuhaft-Ali 2016). Yet, as the Cape Town workshop illustrates, the associated practices are being exported as effective for racialized youth in other global contexts.

The claim featured on the workshop’s “Leading Student Culture” handout—an “orderly environment negates the impact of income level on achievement” and is “universally effective”—squarely locates the solution of an “achievement gap” across global contexts in the inculcation of orderliness in marginalized students and their communities. By implication, the driving force of this gap is not understood as structural inequality, but their disorderliness. This
implication is amplified by the clear gesture to grossly unequal income levels. Yet this fact is
dismissed outright, it is “negated” by a “a strong disciplinary climate.” This completely
sidesteps what Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) in the US context has called “the education debt,”
cumulative impacts of historical and ongoing oppression that have produced gaps in
“achievement” (measured as test scores) and led to a bifurcated society. Similarly, South African
scholars Enver Motala and Salim Vally (2010) have called for understanding persistent inequity
as “backlogs arising from the discriminatory and racist history of South African education and
the deliberately distorted distribution of educational expenditures to favor white people” (88).

4.4 Good Citizens or Disobedient?: Broken Windows and Post-Rainbow Student
Mobilization

Although they sat on the sidelines from teachers and principals, representatives from
several foundations sponsoring the CSPP attended the workshop, including the Michael and
Susan Dell Foundation and Ark. WCED officials also attended, including Debbie Schäfer, the
provincial Minister of Education who was noticeably absent at all the public hearings where her
constituents came out in numbers to oppose the legislation. She briefly addressed participants to
end the day, praising techniques they learned and mentioning hopes that a proposed school
evaluation authority would also pass into law with the collaboration schools since, “what gets
measured improves.” Schäfer compared running a school to business leadership, asserting that
being an educator requires openness to “innovation.” “People don’t like change, but we must try
new things...Our customers are our learners.” She closed by emphasizing the stakes of the
workshop and the powerful role of educators, asserting that teachers can “lead [students] to be
good citizens of South Africa or disobedient and distracted.”
In a context where a long history of resistance through education is being reignited by a new generation of social movements that are resisting neoliberalism’s impacts—the maintenance of racial capitalism and the concomitant thwarting of the promise of a "new" South Africa—it is not surprising that market models’ emphasis on order, compliance, and personal responsibility appeals to legislators who have evaded the redistributive commitments of the political transition. Vally (2020) has argued that a deepening education crisis, coupled with evasion of careful analysis of how class, “race,” and space continue to structure society, has led to growing nostalgia for authoritarianism.

The failure of the public education system to provide quality education for the majority of learners has given rise to recidivism, the crude resort to an apartheid-like disciplinary regime and the privatisation of education. Failure by the state to implement its own policies has resulted in many analysts incorrectly blaming what they consider an all too powerful human rights culture for undermining discipline and respect for authority, as they understand it. This often involves, for example, the nostalgic call for a return to authoritarianism characterised by the “fundamental pedagogics of didactic and choral recitation”, “talk-and-chalk” rote learning, corporal punishment and blaming teachers and learners (and not systemic inequality) for educational shortcomings. (Vally 2020, 10)

As Schäfer stated plainly to the room full of educators, their pedagogical choices have the power to lead youth to be “good citizens of South Africa or disobedient and distracted.” Her perception of a contrast between educating students (“our customers”) for good citizenship and educating for disobedience is notable, given students’ historical and contemporary roles in waging collective disobedience, civil and otherwise, to racial capitalist order. The CSPP launched in five Cape Town schools in 2015, just months after a Black student at the University of Cape Town threw human excrement on a statue of colonialist Cecil John Rhodes, helping set off

89 Maxwele transported excrement in a bucket from Khayelitsha township. His action mimicked previous protests led by township residents (Sekoetlane Jacob Phamodi 2013) and was commentary and reference to bucket toilets provided to township residents that lack sanitation and to stark inequalities in service delivery that persist along race and class lines in postapartheid South Africa.
nationwide university protests under the banners #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall. The movement drew on “the anti-apartheid strategy of ‘ungovernability’ that proliferated in the townships in 1980s South Africa” (gamEdze and gamedZe 2019, 216), particularly amongst high school youth in the wake of the Soweto uprisings. It forced a larger confrontation with “the specific effects and continuation of racial capitalism into South Africa’s present—outsourced Black workers, Marikana, the privatization of education at the moment of racial democratization, the Black township itself” (Gillespie and Naidoo 2019a, 235). Students were “invested in the work of broad social critique of the function of education in relation to the terms of the transition, its failure to escape the long hand of colonial violence and dispossession, and its inability to posit a future into which Black students felt willing to step” (Gillespie and Naidoo 2019a, 235).

Extensive scholarship has focused on the university protests of 2015–16 as a signal of the so-called “born frees” being officially over the transition’s rainbow politics (Gibson 2016; Gillespie and Naidoo 2019b; Mabasa 2020), but less attention has been focused on how Black students at the basic education level participated in these waves. For example, in March 2015, days before Maxwele’s act on UCT’s elite campus, high school students from Philippi township led a protest outside the WCED headquarters in the city center to draw attention to the lack of basic infrastructure at their school. Police violently dispersed them with stun grenades and armored vehicles, injuring several. Athule Baba, a matric, told the press that Philippi High’s six hundred students were learning in ill-maintained shipping containers with no building, sports facilities, or toilets, and had to use a neighboring school’s hall to write exams (Knoetze 2015).
It becomes so unbearably hot in those containers, and in winter we almost freeze to death....We have raised this issue before, but were ignored by the department. Our teachers support us, but they cannot be open about this because they are employees of the department and fear for their jobs. We are not employees, we are pupils trying our best to get good results. Under the current circumstances, it is impossible. So today, we decided to march for our right to education (Knoetze 2015).

In March 2017, 150 Philippi students led another march to demand the promised infrastructure. Still without a building, the students hosted a forum on their school premises in May 2018 called “The Crisis in Education: Perspectives from Philippi High School.” I attended with a friend from a coalition of activist educators that were helping to amplify their struggle. As we sat in a circle in a shipping container classroom during the onset of Cape Town’s wet and windy winter, we strained to hear students’ testimonies of ongoing struggle for a building over the loud flapping of plastic bags that were taped over the spots where windows should have been in a failed attempt to keep out the cold mist that seeped into the space, chilling our bones. Above all, the students, particularly those preparing for the notoriously stressful matric exam that determines access to higher education, emphasized feelings of abandonment and indignation at the energy required for prolonged struggle for basic infrastructure while doing the work of attempting to fulfill the storied dream of schooling as a means to better themselves and their families. One attendee, not wearing a uniform but appearing close in age to the student hosts, listened attentively and only spoke at the very end. “I matriculated from here last year and now I study at UWC. People think I made it, but I’m embarrassed with some of my peers at varsity because I’m still learning to use a computer. What they don’t know is, I never even had a proper school building during my entire time at Phillipi High.”

90 In November 2019, construction was finally completed on a new school building (Western Cape Government 2020)
In *Students Must Rise: Youth Struggle in South Africa Before and Beyond Soweto ’76* (2016), scholars and activists place the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall movements in a larger tradition of Black student mobilization in South Africa and its continuing role in shaping the political landscape, including at the basic education level. In the chapter, “Every Generation Has Its Struggle,” Brad Brockman, a founding organizer of Equal Education, offers a brief history of the movement, which has been organizing high school youth since 2008 to use “research, student mobilisation and the law to ensure that students’ constitutional right to education is realised and the legacy of colonial and apartheid undone” (2016, 168). By juxtaposing Brockman’s account with this chapter’s opening image of Equalisers (EE members) being removed by security from the public hearing, one can conclude that a barrier to students’ efforts has been the Education Department itself. Youth organizing in demand of their right to a basic education, does not seem to fit the vision of “*good citizens*” that Schäfer called on educators in the workshop to foster. In a striking chord of irony, EE’s first organizing campaign in 2008 was actually called “Broken Windows.”

Equalisers were given disposable cameras and asked to take photographs of what they felt prevented them from receiving a quality education. One of the photographs, taken by Zukiswa Vuka, was of a wall of broken windows at her school, Luhlaza High in Khayeltisha. EE’s first campaign was to have the more than 500 broken windows at Luhlaza fixed….The school said it had been asking for years for the windows to be fixed, while the WCED claimed that it was unaware of the problem. A petition calling on the WCED to fix the windows and committing students to look after them was signed by more than 2000 supporters of the campaign through a door-to-door sign-on effort in Khayelitsha. Some WCED officials actively sought to obstruct the campaign, telling principals not to work with EE and trying to intimidate students. (Brockman 2016, 170-71)

After a successful rally and media campaign, the WCED eventually fixed the windows, a victory for EE, but for the purposes of this chapter it is important to linger on how these youth activists’
conceptualization of the broken windows, the neglected physical infrastructure of their schools, as the barrier to a quality education completely challenges the instructional leadership workshop’s portrayal of “student culture” and disorderliness as the source of educational inequality. While the latter calls for a primary solution of imposing order and discipline, justifying turnover of school management to nonstate entities that import racialized “broken windows” theory and pedagogy, the former shares the accountability gaze with the Department and calls on them to #FixOurSchools by investing material resources to address apartheid legacies of inequality.91

4.5 #FixOurSchools: Public Pedagogies of Resistance to Market Reform

In his work at the University of Johannesburg’s Centre for Education Rights and Transformation, Salim Vally (2019) has highlighted South Africa’s “proud history of resistance in and through education. This resistance has generated popular epistemologies and pedagogies against racial capitalism…and its center of gravity today has shifted to the new independent social movements as they resist the impact of neoliberalism and increasing poverty and inequality in post-apartheid South Africa” (2019, 238-9). Returning to that August night in 2018, the tradition Vally describes could be seen in action as attendees of the public hearing largely rejected the silver bullet framing of market-based education reforms and raised important points of dissent that challenged the terms on which PPPs were being portrayed as a solution. Students, parents, teachers, and activists used the public hearings as opportunities to stage a public

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91 EE’s sustained organizing (including a 2011 march on Parliament by 20,000 learners and litigation against the national Minister of Education, all nine provincial MECs for Education, and the Minister of Finance) played a large part in the 2013 establishment of legally binding National Norms and Standards for School Infrastructure. EE’s continued work focuses on holding legislators accountable to these standards (Smalley 2022).
pedagogy of resistance. In their comments, speakers attempted to educate the public on the bill’s provisions, denaturalize racial capitalist logics that undergird them, and shift the terms of debate.

While proponents justified the bill by pointing to gaps in academic results, blaming teachers and communities, or calling for outcomes-based accountability, the diverse array of dissenters focused on infrastructure gaps inherited from colonialism and apartheid, rejecting narratives that teachers or students are to blame for crisis, and shifting the “accountability” gaze to the WCED by demanding it fulfill its role of providing material resources to ensure the constitutional right to a basic education. One parent stated,

_Hearing this parent’s apt description of “schools in the leafy suburbs” as “vulgarly opulent” transported me back to my day at Anglican months earlier, to watching a Launch student learn to tread water, while his Anglican peer floated next to him._

Speakers also emphasized democratic participation, refusing to forfeit governance rights and democratic accountability for outcomes-based accountability and the expediency of

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92 “The struggle continues.” This was a rallying cry of the Front for Liberation of Mozambique’s (FRELIMO) anticolonial struggle for independence. The slogan is in Portuguese, the official language of the former Portuguese colony, and has been adopted in struggles across Southern Africa and beyond.

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“results.” They additionally challenged claims about these results, pointing out that the purported effectiveness of international models is not supported by data. An EE spokesperson noted,

_We cannot help but wonder how stakeholders involved in this project would have responded if the governance of the schools that their children attend were restructured in a similar way.... Despite various requests by EE, we have not seen any research documented on this project or evaluations being published or made available to the public. Notably, evidence on similar models in other parts of the world are decidedly mixed.... In the current climate of rocketing national debt and debt servicing costs, government departments will increasingly start looking towards the private sector and international philanthropists to bolster budgets. We have to ensure that the arrangements that flow from this shortfall in social funding happen on terms that we are comfortable with and that in the process we don’t create undemocratic systems that we will later come to regret._

Finally, a speaker from a group called the Progressive Professionals Forum, who also identified himself as a parent, used the platform to place the bill in the context of what he described as South Africa’s ongoing colonial and apartheid hierarchies and to demystify its incongruous aspects by illustrating how they were connected. While this article has focused specifically on the collaboration schools, this speaker encouraged members of the public to think about how all four of the seemingly random provisions of the bill would function, when considered together, as a means to “further widen the gap between the haves and the have nots.”

_Let us question this directly: which schools do we think this bill speaks to? Point #1, the school evaluation authority, the predominant schools this will be done in are in the townships and subeconomic areas. #2 Intervention centers, which is a euphemism for reform schools. Whose kids are going to be sent to those schools? #3 Collaboration and donor schools. The minister has given herself broad ranging powers to declare any school a collaboration school, which undermines the ability of parents to be involved in the democratic process and have a say in their kids’ education. Again which schools will be affected by this? Schools in the townships and subeconomic areas. But here’s the funny one—oddly, the sale and consumption of alcohol on school premises. This is not for us, this is for the schools in the leafy suburbs! So the Wynberg Boys and the SACS and the Rondebosch [parents] can have their beers...this is the one for schools in the leafy suburbs and for the donors who are part of the DA specifically, who don’t appreciate what colonialism has done to this country. They will whisper to each other that the Black_
people should be thankful for what colonialism did. While they enjoy the benefits of colonialism and apartheid and have cheese and wine! At sporting events of their kids...on public owned property, maintained on minimum wage! This allows huge funds to be raised for these schools which will widen the education gap, but more important, the social gap between the leafy suburbs and the townships. These elite schools have become sanctuaries of privilege and this proposed act will cause an entrenchment of this ideology. As we move forward for a new and a better South Africa, we cannot allow colonial mindsets and worldview to be given a platform in any shape and form. This is exactly what this proposed act is—a way to entrench the colonial mindset in our institutions of learning. It is only a matter of time before Madame Zille tweets about how our world class schools in the leafy suburbs are a product of that colonialism. Watch this space, I promise you!...We should have this racist document scrapped.

Speakers’ testimonies highlighted how Cape Town’s racialized landscape will shape the implementation of collaboration schools by comparing townships and “leafy suburbs,” a reference to spatial engineering that partitioned cities according to lines of state-imposed racial categories (Maharaj 2019). The nature of these enduring divides is vividly portrayed in a recent Time Magazine cover on South Africa as “The World’s Most Unequal Country” which features one of Johnny Miller’s aerial photos of the dramatic borders between townships and wealthy communities throughout the country (Pomerantz 2019). By calling attention to persistent spatial divides, speakers rejected the notion that market solutions of public-private management will improve education in struggling schools. They dispelled the idea that teachers and students simply need improved “culture” or stricter accountability by refocusing attention on vast discrepancies in infrastructure and resulting issues like overcrowding that shape teaching and learning in township schools. These routinely lack libraries and labs, while formerly White public schools have pools, well-manicured grounds, and an array of learning, sports, and arts facilities. Pointing out that the latter continue to be “sanctuaries of privilege,” the final speaker explicitly places contemporary disparities in a long history of colonialism and apartheid. When
he asserts that the legislation will serve people who “whisper to each other that the Black people should be thankful for what colonialism did,” he is referring to a tweet extolling the benefits of colonialism by Helen Zille, former DA leader, key crafter of the bill, and, at the time, Premier of the Western Cape. On March 16, 2017, she attracted outrage by tweeting, “For those claiming the legacy of colonialism was ONLY negative, think of our independent judiciary, transport infrastructure, piped water, etc” (France-Presse 2017). As this parent argues, people who “don’t appreciate what colonialism has done to this country” perpetuate its ideology and the “education gap” and “social gap” it has produced.

Additionally, speakers demystified and challenged the central logic of outcomes-based accountability that the WCED deployed to support the amendment, a logic used to justify market reforms globally. The first speaker, parent of a student in a township school, attempted to shift the WCED’s framing by rejecting its promises to morph turnaround schools into pockets of excellent results in townships; instead, this parent called for universal equity. The second speaker, an EE researcher and activist, also took aim at the “results” narrative, but in an attempt to challenge it on its own terms. She pointed out that the models the WCED relied upon to bolster collaboration school credibility—charter schools in the US and academies in the UK—were questionable. Challenging arguments that these imports can eradicate racial and class divides in South African education, she noted that evidence is “decidedly mixed.” All three speakers also pointed to the fact that allowing philanthropic actors to set educational agendas entrenches racial inequity by undermining hard-won mechanisms of democratic accountability in the name of outcomes. As EE stated in their official submission on the bill to the Western Cape Parliament, “Against a legacy of racially segregated education administrations, and the need for
equality and redress, uniformity in matters of school governance —identified by the Constitutional Court as advancing learners’ interests—is essential” (2018, 6).

In this chapter, I employed critical policy ethnography of South African provincial legislation that introduced “collaboration schools”, public-private partnerships modeled on US charters and UK academies, to examine how racial politics shape both the global circulation and local articulation of market-based education reforms and how Launch is embedded in these politics at local and transnational scales. I drew on theories of racial capitalism to generate new insights about policy borrowing and avoid the “analytical dead ends” of race or class reductionism (Alexander 2013, 122). Anthropological and comparative and international education scholarship has tended to approach the transnational transfer and transformation of educational discourse, policy, and practice through globalization theories that center debates over world culture notions of post WWII convergence or that foreground the neoliberal turn as a rupture producing a global agenda of privatization, deregulation, and austerity (Anderson-Levitt 2003; Ball 2012; Verger, Novelli, and Altinyelken 2012; Steiner-Khamsi and Waldow 2012). While issues of economics, governance, and politics of knowledge are taken up, CIE scholars have under-explored how policy borrowing shapes and is shaped by global racial formations. When CIE scholarship does attend to how racial politics shape policy borrowing, it often reduces racism to background or local context (Sriprakash, Tikly, and Walker 2019), as opposed addressing it as a pressing transnational, yet historically-situated and shifting, phenomenon that has long structured global capitalism and, therefore, educational transfer. As South African scholars Enver Motala and Salim Vally explain, silence on the global salience of racism has grave consequences for analyses and the actions that may follow from them.

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Regrettably, even many left-leaning scholars and activists, especially those who are schooled in Marxism in the West, continue to be dismissive of racism as intrinsic to global capital’s agenda and therefore do not fully understand the relationship between “race” and exploitation on a world scale. As a consequence, they do not understand the specificities of accumulation in developing societies as these are affected by globally organized structures in which forms of difference – “cultural,” “racial,” “religious,” etc. – are fundamental to capitalist accumulation. How the relationship between “race” and class is conceptualized is, therefore, of great epistemological value because it speaks to the privileging or the denial of particular experiences. (Motala and Vally 2010:98)

Examining the global circulation and local articulation of marketized education reforms through the framework of racial capitalism generates new insights about transnational policy borrowing. First, as this chapter illustrates, transfer of market reforms across contexts is not only a matter of economics, it is enabled by, works through, and reconstitutes the coarticulation of capitalism and racism at both transnational and local scales. Second, educational policy borrowing cannot be neatly periodized by histories of neoliberalism, which mark the 1970s as a global turning point (Harvey 2005). As dissenters at the public hearing suggested, analyses must account for longer histories of colonial racial projects that continue to shape policy making and borrowing through their persistence as “imperial debris” (Stoler 2013). Scholars must attend to how traveling reforms contain and produce global racisms, particularly in their entanglement with longstanding and still globally circulating liberal discourses of racial uplift through discipline, character formation, and political passivity (Bates 2019; Webster 2020). These examinations are urgently needed to understand how the (neo)liberal rehashing of these discourses in contemporary discursive devices like “no excuses” bolsters market reform and continues to shape unequal schooling for marginalized youth across contexts. While South Africa accentuates the urgency of this inquiry, since the colonial and apartheid schemes of “separate development” that generated the current education crisis were also borrowed policies modeled on
accommodationist “adapted education” for Black students in the US South (Fleisch 1995; Loram 1917; Magaziner 2016), examinations of the racial politics of contemporary policy borrowing are needed across contexts. Insight’s “expert” workshop facilitators celebrated extending their work with KIPP, TFA, and Ark into edu-businesses advocating market reform and no-excuses teacher training as solutions to “educational inequities caused by structural discrimination” in South Africa, Israel, the Dominican Republic, and more—all sites where the racialization of difference, capitalist accumulation by dispossession, and state violence cohere in ways that produce deep educational inequity. The spread of public-private models like charter, academy, and collaboration schools that center “no-excuses” pedagogy for marginalized youth across global contexts demonstrates that education continues to play a political role in the larger scheme of racial capitalism, with private wealth maintaining “the ability to legislate, shape unequal race relations, broker ideas, and define ‘acceptable' social change” (Watkins 2001).

Finally, this chapter offers methodological contributions, demonstrating how ethnography can provide scholars, practitioners, and publics with 360-views and critical policy lenses, as opposed to abstract, topdown analyses on the terms of policymakers and funders. Ethnographic methods generated a view of how the transnational exchanges of educational organizations and foundations that promote particular visions of “what works” for marginalized students across contexts was linked to processes on the ground where these policies were implemented and contested in South Africa. In tracing how the collaboration schools model moved from pilot to policy to public pushback and how this process was shaped by global and local racial politics, I have situated this case of contemporary educational policy borrowing in larger, longer, and ongoing processes of racial capitalism. Significant policy work goes into framing problems
strategically through discursive devices like “missing sector” and “escape velocity” (aspiration) that mystify political agendas and justify market solutions. Yet dissenters’ uses of their hearing testimonies as a public pedagogy of resistance reveals that affected communities often work just as hard to interrogate and undermine dominant agendas, leveraging education as both a site and strategy of struggle to challenge racial capitalism and renew calls for racial justice.
Conclusion: Schooling as Future-Making

“Rather than vacate the schools and abandon a major terrain of struggle to conservatives and reactionaries, we have the task of transforming the terrain to suit our liberatory purposes.” —Neville Alexander, *Education and the Struggle for National Liberation in South Africa* (2013[1990])

How do students, alumni, families, and staff of a low-fee private school navigate the politics of aspiration in an anti-Black city and marketized schooling landscape? In this dissertation, I have answered this question, showing how Launch interlocutors engage spatial and trauma-informed pedagogies of aspiration in their efforts to transgress persistent apartheid geography and forge futures beyond crisis. I have explored students’ and educators’ accounts of how these pedagogical practices create life-saving breathing room for Black youth in hostile atmospheres. Yet, engaging their critical perspectives, I have argued that Launch’s progressive pedagogies stop short of and compromise the liberatory through their investment in a liberal individualism that emphasizes resilience and striving, while obscuring conscientization of the structural conditions of racial capitalism.

Launch is a site through which Black youth can transcend township constraints, but, as illustrated in the last chapter, the institution has also been positioned by its founder/director as a policy advocate, deepening inequality through the acceleration of market-based education reform in South Africa’s already fractured schooling landscape. Advocates of this acceleration, which is unfolding at local and transnational scales, deploy a market logic of aspiration as educational crisis response to bolster capitalist interventions and deficit-based pedagogies for racially marginalized youth, revealing that the notion of aspiration also has the capacity to perpetuate violence. Drawing on critical perspectives from youth and educators at Launch and in the larger
city of Cape Town, I propose moving schooling away from a fixation on inculcating aspiration and toward the broader generation of a capacity to conspire, or breathe and act collectively toward futures beyond racial capitalism.

C.2 “The Dilemma of Intervention”: Redefining the Crisis

“It’s the dilemma of intervention. The complexity of an unequal world is that virtually every action sets apart somebody for being given a special advantage.” I was sipping rooibos tea with Joseph again before the December holiday and my return to the US. He had invited me to the central development team’s end of year party and agreed to squeeze in one last conversation beforehand. In the spirit of “difficult conversations,” I was confronting him for information on Launch’s collaboration schools involvement, questioning the discrepancies between his stated goal of healing fractures in an unequal society and school system, and his championing policy that would exacerbate them. I also recounted the charged public hearing—particularly Equal Education’s (2018) critique of collaboration schools as “contrary to the spirit of democracy and redress in education” (4). Once again pointing to the pragmatic, he highlighted the shared predicament of sustainability: “Whether you’re a radical group trying to position yourself in the purest possible space or not, you still need money, so we all end up driving back to the same filthy vicar. That very division of what’s radical and what’s not is one reason Sisipho [hypothetical student] has to struggle. Why can’t we allow for the spectrum of work?” Yet, he admitted that Launch had lost something in the collaboration schools project, both in terms of their community relationships and in terms of the quest for sustainability. “We got our feet dirty. We pulled out quickly. We lost something in terms of the relational framework. Also none of those funders fund Launch now.”
Eventually we began discussing the accelerating marketization of schools more broadly, in South Africa and beyond. Situating Launch within this arena, he insisted that it was not akin to Curro or Bridge International Academies, driven by overt profiteering motives that prey on the precarious classes. Nor was it Anglican, explicitly serving the wealthy and enforcing a colonial, assimilationist ethos on those Black youth who could afford entry. It also was not KIPP, emphasizing compliance through draconian codes of discipline. It was “no-excuses” with a more humanistic face. “Distinguishing ourselves as a particular kind of independent school has been a real challenge. I think it’s about identifying and sharing our key levers, including with government schools through the Educators Collective [teacher education program]. Life Orientation circle is not high tech or high cost. It can be run anywhere. The social development program is not high cost. Letting children lead other children. Any school can do these things.”

But he saw funders’ fleeting tastes and trends and their ability to dictate “what works”—typically measured by high-stakes tests—as a barrier. Foregrounding deliberation and confrontation does not produce scores as reliably as “tight transitions,” “100% compliance,” and “SLANT position” (Lemov 2010). “There’s some element of big business and funders now owning what works, not on the basis of research, but on the basis of some sort of ‘feel’ and the degree of compliance. They ‘bless’ certain service providers, including Relay. They get ‘blessed’ and they’re free to act.” Yet, even as he acknowledged the “dilemma” of market-based intervention and its reliance on venture philanthropy, Joseph did not link it to the “crisis” in no-fee public schools. They were simply “broken.”

93 US-based teacher education program started by a collection of charter school management organizations. It is expanding its philosophy and approach globally through a number of small partner organizations. (Philip et al 2018).
The language of crisis, brokenness, tragedy, and intervention permeated daily life during my research on the politics of aspiration in Cape Town’s schooling landscape. At the beginning of the 2016 school year, South Africa’s Basic Education Minister Angie Motshekga hosted an education lekgotla (Setswana word that can be translated to “meeting”), gathering education MECs and department heads from all the provinces. Her description of the education system as a “national catastrophe” and “crisis” characterized by “pockets of disaster” reverberated throughout the nation and gripped headlines (Masondo 2016). As explored in chapters 1 and 4, this description, while based on pressing issues that are even more urgent in the wake of COVID-19, is also part of a transnational discourse that market reform proponents leverage in their efforts to globally spread interventions like charter schools that have “decidedly mixed” and “potentially directly harmful” effects (Equal Education 2018, 4, 6). The crisis discourse also operates as a racial project by eliding how racial capitalism, past and present, produces and reproduces crisis. As Sriprakash, Tikly, and Walker (2019) point out, it “obfuscates its own politics—how the “crisis” came to be and what sorts of concepts of and responses to learning it renders intelligible and possible” (683).

Looking back, I realize that the “crisis” discourse was not just deployed by marketization advocates—it was employed across the political spectrum. Mpumelelo opened this dissertation with a story about hypothetical students Sizwe and Becky, one from a township and the other from a leafy suburb, whose lives are divergently shaped by a “triple helix of poverty, unemployment, and inequality.” Anathi critically reflected on her education at Launch, calling out the failure to conscientize learners about “how the social ills are the result of our history as South Africans.” The “triple helix” and the “social ills” are also discourses of crisis, but
theorized on different grounds and demanding different responses. At stake, then, in the effort to navigate toward futures beyond racial capitalism, is not whether there is a crisis, but an interrogation of the nature of the crisis—how it is defined and what its causes and solutions are.

Joseph, the CDE, and other reform advocates, attribute the crisis to low expectations, incompetency, and personal failings in the no-fee public sector. While they acknowledge it as unfortunate and no doubt linked with the past, it is still portrayed as a matter of bad apples rotting in the system, so the response is to get kids out. The response is more school choice. Kids’ aspirations are on the line. This response then produces a double bind between “choice” and “crisis”, where one simply drives the other, perpetuating the situation. Advocates are able to frame private schooling expansion as a benevolent social justice and even antiracist endeavor through a series of mystifying discursive devices like “affordable,” “missing sector” and, of course, “aspiration” that appear uncontestable and portable. Given that marketing is fundamentally about mystification, engaging in an interrogation of these devices and of the crisis itself has disruptive potential. Is the crisis bad teachers? Bad unions? Bad parents? Bad kids? When did the crisis start? How did things get to this point? In their own ways, both Mpumelelo and Anathi engaged these interrogations in their analyses of Launch. Anathi was quite explicit, asking why the school even has to exist. For both of these alumni, the appropriate crisis response is to face and address the root issues.

For Victor, the former Launch teacher who carried transformative elements of Launch’s pedagogy to teacher education in the no-fee public system while rejecting its achievement gap theory of change and liberal individualist politics, the crisis is located in the reform world itself.
My views have changed through working at Launch and really believing things. I’ve evolved. There’s a belief that we can make the dream of equal education possible and fill this “gap” through KIPPs and Launches. I no longer believe in that approach. I think if Launch did more political work there would be a crisis because, if they’re gonna adhere to certain rhetoric and actually live those out, they wouldn’t be able to run the school the way they have been or do certain things, because they’re either not democratic or not aligned. It’s a huge tension. I think that’s why the whole education reform world is in crisis now because everyone’s realizing the promise of “filling the gap” is not actually possible through whatever tier of schooling you wanna call Launch. Enhancing the independent sector ain’t gonna do it. The humanist, individual school reform won’t cut it.

What will “cut it”? According to the high school student and Equal Education activist who opened Chapter 4 hovering over the provincial parliament and international funders with her protest sign, the answer is #FixOurSchools. Some reform actors have tried to frame EE’s sustained fight against state abandonment of public schools in poor communities as impractical and even hypocritical. David Harrison, CEO of South African foundation DG Murray Trust, who drove the collaboration schools pilot, has claimed that “civil society groups like Equal Education find themselves in the rather awkward position of championing government as the sole provider of quality education, while railing against its failure to do so” (2017). Scholars writing against market reform often face similar critiques. How can we point out the failure of the state and its collusion with capital, while calling for public schooling? South African scholar Sara Black (2021) has faced this contradiction head on, admitting that nostalgic notions like #FixOurSchools and even crisis discourses like “broken” are “premised on a fictitious imagined past, and a present that misrepresents soft-privatised schools as ‘the functioning public’” (35). The task is not fixing, but building (35). While neoliberal orthodoxy has framed the idea of equal and quality public schooling as fantasy, this idea was in fact central to the vision of a democratic South Africa. It is not unimaginable, as evidenced by Global South nations that have turned to public
education as part of collective aspirations to navigate toward a “desired society” (GI-ESCR 2021). This is in stark contrast to market-based education reforms that are characterized by aspiration discourses that “individualize the future” (Pimlott-Wilson 2017). The issue then is not lack of capacity or possibility, but lack of political will. Part of building this will is interrogating crisis discourses that generate expediency and erode political imagination.

C.3 The Capacity to Conspire: Schooling for Futures Beyond Crisis

This dissertation’s interrogation of aspiration, both what it is and what it does, is central to the work of activating political imagination. Interrogating aspiration took on new meaning for me as the COVID19 pandemic swept over the world and into my personal life, pointing me toward the sanctity of breath and ripping me away from writing this dissertation for over six months. As I struggled to find my way back into the text, I found myself lingering on Launch’s emphasis on breath, transporting myself back to those still moments of breathing together with students and teachers that were always held sacred despite the urgency of all the other aspirations—toward matric exam passes or tertiary admissions or futures beyond the township—that permeated the space. As the students, alumni, and teachers in these pages attest, these moments of shared breathing opened up critical sensory capacities that had generative impacts. This breath work allowed people to see and feel and hear and trust themselves and their voices. And it also enabled them to see and feel and hear and trust each other; to “be a mirror” and “relate”. As Anathi suggested, it had the unfulfilled potential to help them see and challenge the world and the conditions more clearly, too. While I have pointed out the discrepancy between Launch’s liberal progressive pedagogies and its larger role in entrenching market reform, I nevertheless
draw on Launch’s attention to collective breath work to propose a reorientation of the relationship between schooling and futures.

Appadurai’s (2013) concept of the capacity to aspire has been germinal in the anthropology of the future, particularly for anthropologists of education who highlight both its unequal distribution and peoples’ agentic navigations of uneven terrains toward desired futures. However, my research at Launch and in Cape Town suggests that pushing the conversation beyond aspiration can generate new and urgent insights. Forging “desired societies”—as opposed to desired individual futures that perpetuate a double bind between “choice” and crisis—requires moving away from schooling as solely a means to fulfill individual aspirations and toward a schooling that also builds the capacity to conspire. Turning toward a capacity to conspire is part of the very work of imagining and forging futures beyond the larger and longer crises of racial capitalism. Because Appadurai approaches aspiration as a “navigational capacity” that is unequally distributed in uneven terrain, that points his gaze (and the gazes of the many scholars who have built on his work) toward a focus on how people level the playing field so they can navigate more smoothly. I argue that there is another route. People do not simply navigate toward futures. They build them, collectively. Schooling is a project of making futures. By calling for a reorienting of schooling toward the capacity to conspire, I aim to emphasize how schooling for shared futures beyond crisis requires an emphasis on building, as opposed to simply steering. I also amplify the fact that building futures beyond the choice/crisis bind can only be accomplished collectively. Like aspiration, the capacity to conspire originates from the power of breath, but shifts focus from “toward” to “with.”
This shift pointed me toward ways people are already building shared futures through the work of conspiring. Concretely, the distinctions between foregrounding aspiration and activating a capacity to conspire, as well as the different futures they make possible, were exemplified in my exploration of spatial pedagogy in Chapter 2. Spatial pedagogy that foregrounded “claiming space,” while transgressive, was focused on access. This did generate alternative futures for individual students, like Anathi, who were lucky enough to study at Launch. She explained that she probably wouldn’t be an avid hiker now if not for those outings. In contrast, spatial pedagogy that was focused on “building space” activated a rewriting of the terrain toward alternative shared futures. This was evident at Launch in the students’ establishment of a neighborhood study center built with shipping containers that still provides space for youth from a variety of schools today. It was also evident beyond schooling in the popular education context of Reclaim the City, where spatial pedagogy was used to “build consciousness” about the political construction of space and its possibility to be arranged otherwise. This consciousness-building generated collective occupations of space toward futures beyond spatial violence. Launch’s facilitation of individual freedom narratives of claiming and expansion is important, in fact life-saving according to several students and alumni, but does not necessarily ameliorate the violence of the atmosphere. Schooling’s potential as a project of making futures beyond racial capitalism (as opposed to just surviving it) is only fulfilled when it is harnessed beyond aspiration, toward a capacity to conspire that pushes the horizon of the possible further.

C.4 Beyond the “Post”: South Africa and the Quest for an Anticapitalist Antiracism

South Africa has long epitomized Black diasporic aspirations for antiracist futures (Grant 2017) and, in its position at the nexus of the postcolonial, postapartheid, postracial, and
postrainbow, it continues to occupy an important place on the world stage. I was reminded of this shortly before I began graduate studies and embarked on this research through a serendipitous find in a box of old books from my mother. Among them was a pamphlet of “I Am Prepared to Die,” Nelson Mandela’s defense statement from the 1964 Rivonia Trial, before he and eleven other members of the armed wing of the ANC were convicted of sabotage and sentenced to life imprisonment. Mandela famously declared that he was willing to perish for a democratic, non-racial South Africa. Likely acquired during my mother’s days of political organizing, the pamphlet still had the fading price tag of $1.00 underneath the information for its publisher, the International Defence & Aid Fund for Southern Africa (IDAF). Funds generated from this publication were smuggled into South Africa for defense and aid of activists as part of a sustained, global mobilization against apartheid (South African History Online 2022c).

Figure 12: August 2013 Instagram post by the author about the discovery of Nelson Mandela’s “I Am Prepared to Die” in a box of old books from her mother.
Despite its pride of place in the global Black imaginary, South Africa has also painfully illustrated the insufficiency of the “post” to generate futures beyond racism. In his defense at the Rivonia Trial, Mandela declared that “Political division, based on colour, is entirely artificial and, when it disappears, so will the domination of one colour group by another. The ANC has spent half a century fighting against racialism. When it triumphs it will not change that policy.” Yet, as history has shown, neither the disavowal nor the celebration of “colour”—the non- nor the multi-racial—has been able to root out the scourge of racism from South Africa, or elsewhere. This is precisely why theorists of racial capitalism have advocated a “radical” approach, an approach that strikes “at the root”—an anticapitalist antiracism. As Neville Alexander (1983), Cedric Robinson (2020), and others have argued, the fight against racism must be an anticapitalist fight because capitalism is racist everywhere and everywhen it is found, even in a Black led “post”racial democracy. Capitalism is inherently racializing. It operates through “assign[ing] differential value to human life and labor” (Kelley 2020, xv). What Cedric Robinson (2020) called the “ideological phantasmagoria of race” (27) is necessary to differentiate “types” of people as available to shoulder the exploitation and disposability capitalism requires. Time has shown that embracing nonracialism while racial capitalism is left intact is insufficient for the disappearance of domination. Neville Alexander (1983) warned of this, insisting that nonracialism must lead on to antiracism, which “not only involves the denial of ‘race’ but also opposition to the capitalist structures for the perpetuation of which the ideology and theory of ‘race’ exist”.

This insistence on an anticapitalist antiracism also matters for scholarly analyses of racism in comparative and global perspective. Reflecting on the 2001 U.N. World Conference
Against Racism hosted in Durban, South Africa, anthropologist Leith Mullings (2005) argued that the global consolidation of capitalism and the incorporation of elements of racialized populations into its neoliberal project produced “new forms of race, making it an unstable fluid order, characterized by old and new forms of dispossession, accumulation, and resistance” (675). No longer reliant on familiar racial stereotypes, capital manufactured new ways of managing racialized inequality. In both South Africa and the United States for example, color-evasive\textsuperscript{94} discourses like multiculturalism and rainbowism serve to deny—and bolster—the continuing prevalence of racism. While biological notions of race are widely disavowed, individual meritocracy and “culture of poverty” discourses are also deployed to explain and deflect attention from structural forces that have produced and maintain racialized stratification (Mullings 2004). These racist-without-race (Bonilla-Silva 2003) discourses enhance the fluidity of global capitalism, facilitating the imposition of market-based reforms across transnational context. This was concretely illustrated in my dissertation, for example, in the “low expectations” and “no-excuses” discourses that easily flowed through education reform networks of policymakers, funders, and “experts,” making way for the global expansion of a charter/academy/contract/collaboration school model which, although characterized by deficit pedagogies, continues to be framed as a social justice intervention for racially marginalized youth from the United States to the United Kingdom to South Africa. This means that scholarly analyses must be agile and always attuned to the cunning and persistent alliance of racism and capitalism worldwide. Frameworks that approach the global expansion of neoliberal education reforms in a manner that only foregrounds class and economic dynamics will not suffice. But

\textsuperscript{94} “Color-evasive” avoids the ableism of the more commonly used “colorblind” and emphasizes the willfulness of refusal to recognize racism (Annamma, Jackson, and Morrison 2015).
neither will ideological analyses of racism that divorce it from political economy. Scholarship must avoid the “analytical dead ends” (Alexander 2013, 122) of race or class reductionism if it aims to contribute to a global project of antiracism, as opposed to generating more mystification that undermines it.

While globalization has produced new types of accumulation and dispossession, it has also generated transnational alliances mobilizing against racial capitalism. Scholars must attend to and can learn from and contribute to these coalitions. In this dissertation, I gesture to them in my discussion of watching Kurt Orderson’s *Not in My Neighbourhood* (2018) at a guerilla screening hosted by Reclaim the City, but there were countless other ways these alliances showed up during this research and continue to sustain my inquiry now. Two bear mentioning, particularly for how they illustrate education’s power to coalesce transnational mobilizations against racial capitalism. One of the first events I attended during the 2018 school year in Cape Town was an Equal Education–hosted film screening of *Backpack Full of Cash* (Mondale 2016), which chronicles the expansion of charter schools in the United States and how they have deepened inequality. During the debrief, youth organizers expressed their questions and concerns about the increased presence of low-fee private schools in townships like Khayelitsha, where the screening was held. Through their work with EE, these South African high school students were also learning about and from youth education activists in other parts of the world. This was powerfully illustrated when I attended EE’s National Congress gathering in 2015 and found that high school activists from Chile were in attendance to speak about their uprisings against marketized education reform, which rose to a global spotlight and have since been attributed as helping to bring about the currently in progress rewriting of the Chilean Constitution (Casals
2021; Equal Education 2012; Prashad 2021). Additionally, the Centre for Education Rights and Transformation at the University of Johannesburg is a major source of scholarship and coalition that has sharpened my analysis of education and social justice in South Africa and beyond. The Centre is a key voice producing critical, public-facing scholarship to encourage a deeper interrogation of the rapid growth of private school in South Africa and marketized school reform more broadly (Nkosi 2015; Spreen, Stark, and Vally 2015). I have been particularly enriched by their annual Neville Alexander Commemorative Conference, which I attended in Johannesburg while conducting research, and which kept me connected when it convened online in 2021 focused on “Racial Capitalism in the USA, SA and Palestine.” Panelists included US-based scholar-activists Barbara Ransby and Robin D.G. Kelley, who discussed connections between the Movement for Black Lives and antiracist struggles in contemporary South Africa. Clearly, South Africans were looking to the United States, and I argue that we—scholars aiming to amplify global educational struggles on behalf of Black lives—must look to South Africa. Just as scholars like Cedric Robinson looked to South Africa to help forge a capacious global theory of racial capitalism that continues to aid antiracist organizing, we can continue to gain valuable insight on our shared predicaments through engaging with South African intellectuals and activists today—particularly those harnessing education as both a site and strategy of struggle.

Coda: Shaping the Field of Relations: A Note to the Students

Ethnographic research methods are premised on the assertion that research is always fully mired in subjectivity (Wolcott 1999). Research can never be an objective exercise of simply observing some particular field of activity or relations from a detached or pure vantage point that leaves the field untampered with. We shape the field and it shapes us as we observe and
participate. Lived experience is apprehended through living it, through engaging with people on their terms and their turf, always remembering that we bring a self with us into these engagements and that self is the vantage point from which we generate insight. My research on how Black youth and their families and teachers navigated the politics of aspiration in a marketized schooling landscape was fundamentally shaped by a particular experience I brought into the field with me—teaching in Newark, NJ. As mentioned several times in this dissertation, it is literally where this research found me. That context is also where I navigated some of the contradictions to which I apply a critical lens in this dissertation. I taught in a district public school. I participated in Teach for America. I taught at a “no-excuses” charter school. I witnessed Mark Zuckerberg’s “gift”-giving (Russakoff 2015) and stood in the foreground of his photo op with my students. And ten years later, I processed the impact of the education reform “movement,” and my participation, on my original district school, as it faced under-enrollment and potential closure, while corporate-backed charter school management organizations, unchecked by school boards or any democratic governing body, expanded their influence in the city. This is the vantage point from which I saw and heard and shared space with interlocutors as they navigated Cape Town’s increasingly segmented marketplace of schools. It is also the vantage point from which I gained access to my core site and many other spaces and, while this lens surely obscured certain aspects of the phenomena, it clarified others. As a teacher who continues to navigate similar terrain, I hope it is clear that critical perspectives offered in these pages are not criticisms pointing blame at educators but pointing to the conditions within which we work.
The majority of my time in the field was spent with the 2018 Grade 12 cohort. My experiences as a teacher fundamentally shaped these research engagements. Discussing teacher research as “a way of knowing,” Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) argue that teacher researchers are uniquely positioned to generate emic insights through “systematic subjectivity” (43). While I was not a Launch staff member, there were many times when I took on a functional role as a teacher in my interactions with Grade 12s. I facilitated several sessions focused on their educational autobiographies and led guest lessons with the students who had elected to take history. Being a researcher also gave me the opportunity to take on a learner role during these instructional interactions, as the students taught me about schooling at Launch and in Cape Town. Engaging in this type of “practitioner inquiry” offered unique insights into the politics of aspiration at Launch. In the days before completing this dissertation, I was vividly reminded of these insights, and the interactions that generated them, when I was searching my phone notes for something and came across a note I had forgotten about. It was the speech I gave when the students asked me to speak at their matric ball. I had not read it since delivering it in 2018.

Reading this transported me back to the moment of delivering it. It serves as a methodological note revealing a lot about what I actually did as a researcher and illustrating how steeped I was in the ethos and daily life of the school. More importantly, it concludes this dissertation with a note of gratitude to the core interlocutors who made it possible.

I first met the 2018 matrics in 2014, when you were lowly Grade 8 students still adjusting to the ways of Launch. I could relate to you, since it was also my first time navigating this very unique school community. And even back then, I could tell that you were a special group. Since I was shadowing Mr. Lukhanyo in his history classes, teaching some classes of my own, and sitting in on Ms. Siphiwe’s Maths sessions, I had the chance to get to know many of you and I took note of your strong and bold voices, contagious enthusiasm and energy, and collaborative spirit. Returning years later and working with you as
Grade 12s, it was refreshing to see that Mandla’s critical thinking and questioning, Ayanda’s sharp eye for aesthetics and style, Awethu’s sly sense of humor, and the unique personalities of each of you were intact, yet you all had evolved and matured remarkably.

I arrived at the end of last year during the December holiday and my first time back at Launch was on Christmas Day at the container. It was a joy to see Xolisa dressed up as Santa wearing a beard and red suit merrily handing treats to kids and making balloon animals. Seeing you and your peers volunteering your time off and joyously giving to future generations of young people who might sit in these seats was a reminder of what education is all about. We don’t learn simply so that we may advance our individual selves; we learn so that we may teach and share, and create ripple effects whose impacts reach farther than we can ever know. This is also a special group in terms of Launch’s story. With the recent move to Langa, the expansion of the school, and some of the other changes, Launch itself has entered into a new chapter of its story. Your class, being one of the groups that have experienced Launch in its old home and its new one, has played an important role in settling the school into its new place, and you hold important insights about the transition.

This year, I returned to Launch in the role of researcher and I enlisted your help in thinking about how to approach answering questions about Launch’s unique position in Cape Town and South Africa, and about Launch’s impact in communities over the last 15 years. You have offered endless insight and even tweaked the research design with your feedback. As part of this work, we have been thinking a lot about stories and the power involved in telling them. Each of us is writing and rewriting the story of our life in every moment and with each action we take. And all of us here have had the privilege of witnessing the Grade 12s as you navigate through an important and pivotal chapter.

I challenged you as matrics this year to write an educational autobiography, to reflect on your life stories through the lens of education. First we reflected on education—What is it? When does it occur and where? Is it only in school? Why do we seek it? The conversations were eye-opening, as you shared your experiences not only in primary school and at Launch, but also in your families, in church, on the sports field, in music, in the arts, in cultural traditions, in your travels, in your social lives and relationships, and countless other places. Then I challenged you with a question: What is the title of your story? Can you title your story in 6 words or less? Through your responses, I learned that you are in the process of writing remarkable life stories. The titles would jump off the shelves at any library or bookstore.

Finding the Light
Walk the Talk
Turning My Signature Into an Autograph
Dreaming the Life Living the Dream
Music My Shield, Voice My Spear

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I am grateful for the privilege of getting to know this class better this year and even meeting students who weren’t here when I first came in 2014. I’ve witnessed Sinako’s quick thinking and clever rebuttals at debate competitions, including against Mr. Joseph’s high school, which Launch gloriously defeated. I’ve listened to Thembisa and Viwe’s eloquent and confident public speaking in competition against Forest High. I’ve seen Sinelizwi’s strong leadership of the choir and heard Nolubabalo’s beautiful voice among the singing. I’ve reflected on Thandiwe’s sharp analysis of history as we discussed connections between the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa and the Black Power Movement in the United States. I’ve heard tales of Sandile and Mandisi’s athleticism carrying them all the way to Switzerland. I’ve seen Fezile and Lilitha delay their trips home just to walk me to the taxi stop and wait with me. And I’ve even had my portrait drawn by the artist himself, Thulani. Although I haven't mentioned everyone by name here, I'm grateful that I’ve been able to interact with all of the students of this class in meaningful ways and form relationships with many of you. As you enter the final part of your high school career and prepare for your next journey, I want to leave you with some advice. The first two things come from your peers’ stories.

Finding the Light, by Thembisa: “Throughout my life with all its ups and downs, the struggles I went through, trauma and so forth, education has been my tool to ‘finding the light’, a bright future for myself.”

Knowledge is Only Potential Power, by Mandla: “Yes, knowledge is the key to success, however knowledge is not power; it is potential power. It is easy to acquire, but it is useless if it’s not organized into definite plans or action and directed for a definite goal... ONLY then it becomes powerful!”

The last piece of wisdom is from a poet we read and listened to together, Koleka Putuma. She says, “You owe your dreams your courage.” People tend to associate courage with fearlessness or tenacity, but it doesn’t mean that at all. The word courage comes from the Latin word cor, for heart. A word that is very dear and familiar to you all as students at Launch, where learning happens not just with the head, but with the heart.

Be sure to take your courage with you as you move on to the next chapter of your story.

I look forward to reading it.
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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Schooling Experiences in a Low-Fee Independent Township High School

This is a semi-structured interview involving questions around the six areas listed below.

Thank you for taking part in an interview today for the research project titled “Schooling Experiences in a Low-Fee Independent Township High School”. The purpose of this focus group is to seek perspectives on the role of schooling in achieving individual mobility and social transformation in South Africa. The discussion we generate here today will help researchers and educators to better understand the social, political, and cultural aspects and impacts of education.

Personal and Family Background

Let’s start by talking a bit about your personal background.

1. How would you introduce yourself to a stranger?

2. Describe your family or the people who live in your household.

3. Tell me about the neighborhood and community where you live.
   a. (Optional follow up: Is this the same place you grew up? If not, tell me about that neighborhood)

4. What is it like to grow up in ____?

Educational Background

Now I’d like to ask you about your educational background and experiences.

5. What are the typical views and experiences on education in your family?
   a. How about in your neighborhood?
   b.

6. Describe each school you have attended and your history as a student.
   a. (For staff interviewees: Describe each school you have worked at and your history as a teacher.)
   b.

7. How would you describe yourself as a learner?

8. Think of one educational event that has impacted your life in a profound or meaningful way. Describe it to me.
9. Are there one or two people who were especially important in your development as a student and learner, and why?

Experiences as a Launch Student/Alumni/Teacher/Family Member

Now let’s talk more specifically about your experiences at Launch.

10. Can you tell me how you and/or your family decided to come to Launch?

11. Before you (or your child/family member) came to Launch, what were your expectations of what it would be like? Were these expectations confirmed or contradicted and how?

12. How would you describe Launch in comparison to other high schools that young people from your neighborhood attend?
   a. (Optional follow-up) What are some things that distinguish Launch students from students in other schools?

13. (For student/alumni/teacher interviewees) Can you take me through a typical day at Launch?
   a. (For family) What do you think a typical day is like at Launch?

14. (For student/alumni/teacher interviewees) Think back to your first day at Launch. Describe it to me in detail.

15. (For student/alumni/family interviewees) Have your (or your child/family member’s) self-perception and/or self-presentation changed or evolved since starting at Launch? If so, how?
   a. (For staff) In your experience, do student self-perception and/or self-presentation evolve after they attend Launch? If so, how?

16. How is Launch viewed by people in Langa who aren’t affiliated with the school?

17. Launch takes students to all over the city both here and Langa and outside. They also take them to other schools and institutions. In your opinion, how do these experiences impact students?
   a. (For students/alumni) Tell me about a particular trip you took with Launch and how it impacted you personally.

Future (Student and Family Interviewees Only)

Now let’s talk about your plans and hopes for your (your child’s) future.

18. What are your goals after graduating from Launch?
a. (For family members: What are your goals for ______ after they graduate from Launch?)

19. Imagine yourself (or your child/family member) 10 years after you (they) have graduated from Launch. Describe your (their) life.

20. What role do you think Launch plays in helping you (them) achieve this vision?

21. Describe the matric exam to me. How do you feel about the exam? How important is it for your (or your child/family member’s) future?

Postsecondary Experiences (Alumni Interviewees Only)

22. What was (is) your first year after graduating Launch like? What were you doing? Was this what you had planned?

23. How have your experiences at Launch impacted your life after graduation?

24. Did you (do you) continue to pursue education after Launch? Where and why?
   a. (If yes, ask the follow-ups below)
      i. What institution do you attend? Describe the environment there.
      ii. What does a tertiary education mean for you? What are the anticipated outcomes or results?
      iii. How well do you think your high school experience prepared you for the social and cultural environment at your institution? Could Launch have done anything to better prepare you and your peers for higher education?

25. Did you seek employment after Launch? where and why?
   a. (If yes, ask the follow-ups below)
      i. Where have you been employed since Launch? Describe the work environment.
      ii. What does this employment mean for you? What are the anticipated outcomes or results?
      iii. How well do you think your high school experience prepared you for the social and cultural environment at your place of work? Could Launch have done anything to better prepare you and your peers for an environment like this?

Views on Education and Society

26. In your opinion, what is the purpose of education? Why are people sent to school?

27. In your opinion, do all students have an equal chance at education? Explain.
a. Follow up with specific probes, if appropriate:
   i. In Langa?
   ii. In Cape Town?
   iii. In South Africa?
   iv. In the world?

Wrap Up

28. Is there anything that I haven’t asked you about that you think I should? Anything else that’s relevant in an interview like this?

29. Do you have any questions you’d like to ask me?