

Review Forum

New histories of education in South Africa: in conversation with Goolam Vahed and Thembisa Waetjen's *Schooling Muslims in Natal: identity, state and the Orient Islamic Educational Institute*

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The articles in this section are revised versions of papers presented at a panel called 'Beyond Soweto: new histories of education in South Africa' held at the African Studies Association's (hereafter ASA) meeting in San Diego in November 2015. The panel was organised for two reasons: to discuss Goolam Vahed and Thembisa Waetjen's recently published book *Schooling Muslims in Natal*; and to reflect on a renewed interest in the history of education in South Africa, of which participants' work forms a part (Vahed and Waetjen 2015). In the months leading up to the ASA meeting, however, protests at South Africa's higher education institutions – challenging the slow pace of transformation and proposed fee hikes – provided an added impulse for the critical consideration of schooling and society.

Apartheid's grossly unequal education system attracted the attention of several generations of scholars who combined activism, schooling/teaching, and critical writings: to name some notable figures, Linda Chisholm, Pam Christie, Jon Hyslop, Jonathan Jansen, Peter Kallaway, Bernard Magubane, Robert Morrell, Es'kia Mphahlele, Isaac Tabata, and Elaine Unterhalter. The diversity of writings on educational issues, in form and approach, challenges the view that there was some kind of singular apartheid-centred way of framing knowledge production that

scholars today can somehow transcend with new approaches. However, if we include popular culture and media, and recognise important exceptions, we can note that educational studies did gravitate toward a series of prominent themes. These included the ‘loss’ of mission schools after the 1953 Bantu Education Act, the ‘crisis’ in schooling after the 1976 Soweto uprising, in the sharp differences between (rather than connections between) ‘white’ and ‘black’ schooling, and the nationally (rather than transnationally) constituted forces shaping educational practices and politics.

Here, panelists emphasised different educational themes and placed these in conversation with Vahed and Waetjen’s beautifully written study *Schooling Muslims in Natal*. Mention must also be made here of panelist Meghan Healy-Clancy’s book *A World of Their Own* which, among things, helps us to rethink from a gendered perspective the apparent decline of mission schools and the connection between these and the workings of the KwaZulu homeland (Healy-Clancy 2013); and then soon to be published Dan Magaziner’s unique book on the history of art education in twentieth century South Africa, *The Art of Life in South Africa* (Magaziner 2016). Clive Glaser was not part of the panel but his recent work on the rise and fall of schools in Soweto throws new light on the township that led the 1976 student protests (Glaser 2015).

Schooling Muslims is valuable to my own current work that traces the long history of schooling marketisation in Durban. My project takes as its departure point the affinities between Group Areas era racial segregation and modern zoned (ie catchment area) approaches to schooling in the 1950s and 60s. Here, *Schooling Muslims* gives unparalleled attention to the formative role of schools in the drawing of racial boundaries in Group Areas South Africa. Most of the schools operating in Durban today are in fact built after – and thus cast spatially in the mould of – the 1950 Group Areas Act. This holds true not only for schools built in giant new townships like KwaMashu, Umlazi, or Chatsworth but even for privileged white schools: between 1952 and 1962 the number of white high schools more than doubled, from 7 to 15 (see Hunter 2016).

The Orient Islamic school was originally planned to be built in south Durban. In 1943 the Orient Islamic Educational Institute, the book’s main protagonist with financial and cultural ties that crossed the Indian Ocean, purchased 80 acres of land at Durban’s Bluff. Yet as Orient’s male leaders prepared to lay the first bricks of the new school, city officials forced the

shelving of these plans citing the necessary expansion of white housing. As the authors cite, AI Kajee, prominent leader and trader, responded that what was happening at the Bluff was not so-called ‘Indian penetration’ – the term that rang around ‘white’ Durban at the time – but in fact ‘white penetration’. Orient’s expulsion from the Bluff demonstrates the political power of white voters and the generous state assistance put aside for the settlement of working-class whites in south Durban.

However, as Orient School’s history shows, at times schools also played a *disruptive* role in the racial carving up of the city. A stratum of reasonably well-to-do ‘Indians’ faced the particular wrath of Durban’s ‘whites’ with whom they competed in the market place for urban space. However, the educational complex of 13 schools near Curries Fountain helped to prevent the more widespread forced removals of ‘Indian’ spaces. Prominent schools in the complex included Orient (this being its eventual location), Gandhi Desai High School, and Durban Indian Girls’ High School.

Another reason for the Group Areas Act’s relatively weak enforcement in the lower Berea – one that talks to hierarchies in white education – was that this area had a reputation for housing working class whites looked down on literally and figuratively by whites from ‘larney’ (South African slang meaning affluent, bourgeois) upper Berea areas like Musgrave. Complicit in the area’s low status was the low standing of its local secondary boys’ school, Mansfield High School.

Schools provide a valuable lens, therefore, into how racial segregation worked through class differences. Mansfield’s proximity to this Indian schooling complex, and by association the less prestigious lower Berea, made it a favourite school into which white students were admitted when they were refused entry into more prestigious Berea schools. One former teacher from a famous upper Berea Boys’ school told me that ‘Every day we used to thank the Lord for Mansfield [school]’. He also told me that Mansfield was a school to which children could be encouraged to attend if they failed the infamous pencil hair test (testing for whether they were ‘coloured’).

If schools provide a window into the period of segregation, Vahed and Waetjen also show how they reveal insights into the period of desegregation. After democratic elections, heated debates took place at Orient about whether to stay in the public system or go private – the school eventually choosing the latter path. Indeed, by the mid-1990s there were

close to 20 independent Muslim schools in KwaZulu-Natal alone. Alongside this, Vahed and Waetjen chart how Orient then moved from a Muslim school – in fact in previous decades, the majority of teachers and many students weren't Muslim – to an Islamic school with more focus on Islamic studies and life skills.

By the 1980s white schools in Durban, especially the least status ones, had falling numbers and dropping revenues. In 1988 Mansfield High School closed its gates after 77 years. Two years later, in 1990, the modern era of desegregated white schools was launched when the state encouraged schools to admit black students and introduce fees. Most formerly 'white' schools – trapped by their high overheads and falling white numbers – voted to take this path and retain considerable financial support from the Department of Education.

Schooling Muslims demonstrates convincingly that race is an insufficient framework through which to view schooling. But one question I have is the extent that Orient's path – to private status and Islamic orientation – is consistent with changes in schools that resulted in 'lumpy desegregation' across the system. That is as competition between schools accelerated, there was not an even level of desegregation among schools; on the contrary a few schools retained a large number of pupils from their legacy race (eg remained predominantly white or Indian) whereas the majority of schools, in local terms, 'went black'.

To conclude, *Schooling Muslims in Natal* is both transnational in outlook and attendant to the details of everyday schooling. It provides a revealing window into an educational system that remains deeply unequal – if for reasons that need to be placed firmly and creatively in historical context.

References

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