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**Colouring Sexualities: how some  
black South Africans schoolgirls  
respond to ‘racial’ and gendered  
inequalities.**

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### **Abstract**

The paper draws on an interview study on the lives and identities of Grade 11 (16-17 year old) boys and girls in schools differing by 'race' and social class composition in Durban – a formerly Indian, formerly white girls' and boys' schools and a black township school. Class and 'racial' inequalities are not only generated between pupils going to these different schools (so unequal are they in terms of resources) but also between pupils going to the same 'racially' mixed formerly Indian and formerly white schools. This paper focuses on interviews conducted with black girls, and a key theme emerging from the black girls in the formerly Indian and formerly white schools was how marginalised they felt and how critical they were of forms of racism from other pupils and teachers. Black girls in the township school were less critical of forms of racism - many having never engaged with people of other 'races.' The study was not specifically about 'race' but about young people's identifications, interests and relationships generally. Loosely structured and mono-ethnic interviews were conducted about 'being young people of their age,' and in the interviews with black girls 'race,' as well as sexuality was introduced and addressed in engaged ways by girls themselves, signalling their importance as themes in their lives. Rather than exploring 'race' and sexuality in isolation of each other, the paper examines how black girls, at these different schools, draw on heterosexuality when identifying themselves in relation to girls (and boys) they construct as 'racial' Others. Whereas school based studies on sexuality and black girls in Southern Africa have tended to emphasise coercion, abuse and harassment, this paper examines how black girls may use sexuality as a resource and source of self esteem in contexts where they feel subordinated 'racially' and as girls, even though, paradoxically, it may be in relation to heterosexuality that they feel particularly subordinated.

## Introduction

This chapter draws on an interview study we conducted which sought to explore the lives and identities of Grade 11 (16-17 year olds) students in four schools: formerly white boys' and girls' schools, a black township school and a formerly Indian school in the Durban area. (Durban has one of the highest populations of Indians living outside India). Its focus is on black<sup>1</sup> girls, and notably those interviewed in the formerly Indian school and, to a lesser extent, the black township school. It investigates how these particular girls identify in relation to Others, and especially males and females from other 'races' partly through the ways they speak about sexuality.

Vasu Reddy (2004: 5) has argued 'that sexuality ... seems to be associated with pain, suffering, mourning and death (in the context of HIV/AIDS and sexual violence) in Africa,' in contrast with 'the west where the material conditions seem to support sexuality as an aspect to be associated with pleasure, desire, sensuality (indeed freedom).' Recent school based studies of black girls and heterosexuality in South Africa have focused on the sexual abuse and violence perpetrated against them by boys and older men (see Morrell 1998, 2000; Human Rights Watch 2001; Jewkes et al. 2002; Bhana 2005). This research is enormously important in drawing attention to abuses which may be taken for granted and seen as the outcome of natural gendered behaviour. However, as Patricia McFadden (1992 & 2003) has argued, and Rob has argued elsewhere, Pattman (2005), concern for the sexual rights of black girls and women in the region must address female sexual agency and desire as well as violations of their rights through sexual abuse and violence. This paper aims to examine the meanings that black South African schoolgirl interviewees themselves attach to sexuality, and how they invoke sexuality, in response to 'racial' and gendered inequalities. It examines how black girls may use sexuality as a resource and source of self-esteem in contexts where they feel subordinated 'racially' and as girls, even though, paradoxically, it may be in relation to heterosexuality that they feel particularly subordinated.

Before referring to the interviews we shall elaborate briefly on the schools our interviewees attended and where the interviews took place. What was so striking about these was how different they were in terms of resources and composition of students.

In schooling in post-apartheid South Africa enrolment of people from different 'races' has occurred in the more affluent institutions, notably the formerly white schools enrolling middle class black and Indian students whose parents have moved to the catchment areas, and who can afford the school fees, while the much poorer educational establishments have become entrenched as black or Indian. Black schools in the townships and the rural areas are not referred to as formerly black schools since *all* the students and teachers are black (see Soudien 2004: 89) while (formerly) Indian schools, like the one in our study, may have a few black students. In our study Makgoba, the 'black township school', was indeed exclusively black, and the inferiority of the black township school – no wide open spaces or nearby sports pitches, no trees, no buildings with stairs, no long corridors, no assembly halls, no areas to retreat from the large numbers of other people and no library, study areas or computer rooms – reflected the implication of the inferiority of blacks. The contrast between black schools and formerly white schools in our study was highlighted by affluent black parents sending their children to formerly white schools. Though the formerly white schools with their mix of white, black and Indian students can be read as exemplars of post-apartheid integration, they are, when set in relation to the much more poorly resourced black schools, elitist institutions which reinforce assumptions about white superiority and black inferiority.

Makgoba looked rather like a prison compound with the main building comprising basic classrooms constructed in a rectangle and surrounded by high fences with barbed wire. At break times children congregated and squeezed into the small spaces between the classrooms and fences. In terms of resources, Gandhi, the formerly Indian school, lay somewhere in-between Makgoba and Dale Girls' High, the formerly white girls' school. Like Makgoba, it seemed quite functional, with classrooms not housed inside large buildings as they are in the formerly white schools, but in basic make-shift units. However there was more space in Gandhi than Makgoba for students to mix and socialise at break time. At Gandhi 85% of the pupils were Indian and 15% black, and at Dale Girls' High 12% were black and the rest were made up of about equal proportions of white and Indian.

Class and 'racial' inequalities are not only generated between pupils going to these different schools (so unequal are they in terms of resources) but also between pupils going to the same 'racially' mixed formerly Indian and formerly white schools. A key theme emerging from the black girls in the formerly Indian and

formerly white schools was how marginalised they felt and how critical they were of forms of racism from other pupils and teachers. Black girls in the township school were less critical of forms of racism – many having never engaged with people of other ‘races.’ The study was not specifically about ‘race’ but about young people’s identifications, interests and relationships generally. Loosely structured and mono-ethnic interviews were conducted about ‘being young people of their age’, and in the interviews with black girls ‘race,’ as well as sexuality were introduced and addressed in engaged ways by the girls themselves, signalling their importance as themes in their lives. Rather than exploring ‘race’ and sexuality in isolation of each other, the paper examines how black girls, at these particular schools (focusing mainly on Gandhi), deploy heterosexuality in contexts where they feel marginalised, and, in so doing, attempt to construct and assert themselves in relation to girls (and boys) they identify as ‘racial’ Others.

### **Theorising Identities**

A major concern which framed the research was to address young people both as active agents constructing their identities, and, at the same time, constrained by the cultural resources available to them (see Frosh et al. 2000). Hence we used the participatory methodology outlined below, and focused on ‘race,’ gender and social class as influences constraining group identifications and the sorts of cultural practices associated with these.

Addressing the young people as active agents means theorising ‘race’ and gender not as essences which they have which make them behave in certain ways, but as categories constructed by the young people themselves. According to social constructionist accounts of ‘race’ and gender there are no black, white or Indian, male or female essences, rather they are renderings of blackness or femininity that make sense only in relation to characteristics constructed as Other. Some social constructionists have drawn on psychoanalysis to develop a radical critique of the reification of opposing identities like black and white, male and female as fixed and independent opposites. ‘Opposed identities ... are not only constructed in relation to each other’, Richard Johnson argues, ‘they always carry in their inner configurations, some version (fantasy, image, imago) of the Other’ (Johnson 1997: page). ‘Racial’ and gendered identities, then, are not only played off in relation to each other, but produce the Other through projected anxieties as well as longings which are split off from self. A sense of ‘racial’ or gendered identity is derived *through* constructing the ‘racial’ or gendered Other, which becomes a fantasy structure on to which difference is projected, a peg onto which fears or desires can be hung. This paper draws on this social constructionist/psychoanalytic framework, and focuses on how black girls in different kinds of schools construct and engage with Others.

Rather than taking sexuality as an essential quality inhering in post-pubescent young people, for example as a drive fuelled by the possession of male and female hormones which make girls and boys different and produce predictable and similar feelings, attitudes and behaviour among all girls (and all boys), sexuality is addressed in this paper as a key resource which black girls draw on in the very process of identifying themselves in their particular schools in relation to various groups they define as Other. We focus on how sexuality was invoked discursively by black girls rather than seeing it as something which speaks for itself.

### **Methodology**

Loosely structured interviews were conducted with Grade 11 boys and girls in single sex and mixed, multi ethnic and mono-ethnic groups in the two schools already mentioned as well as a formerly white boys’ and girls’ schools. When arranging the interviews we asked teachers to select students for each group whom they considered reflected a range of levels of ability and commitments to school work.

Twenty-two interviews were conducted with young people in groups, usually comprising six, at the four schools. We shall be drawing mainly on two interviews, both with single-sex and mono-ethnic respondents, involving six black girls at Gandhi and five at Makgoba. Rob, a white British man, was the interviewer at Gandhi, and with the Makogba girls Deevia, a South African Indian woman, and Rob were co-interviewers. The interviews then were not strictly single sex nor mono-ethnic. Among the Gandhi girls, five were living with both their parents, and one with her mother only. For all these girls at least one of their parents was employed – in lower middle class grades in teaching, the police force, social work or insurance. They protested that because they were black going to an Indian school, it was often assumed by Indian pupils and teachers that they were poor and lived in the shack accommodation in the schools’ catchment area. Among the Makgoba girls, one was living with both her parents, one with her grandparents and three with their mothers. Only three of these girls had parent/s/guardians who were employed – in cleaning and domestic work. We shall also be

referring very briefly to the black girls we interviewed at Dale Girls' High, all of whom lived with parents or mothers alone who were employed in lower or upper middle class grades in the public and private sectors.

There were certain general themes we tried to 'cover' in all the interviews we conducted – for example relations with students of the same and other 'races', with boys and girls, and with adults, pleasures and anxieties, aspirations, interests and leisure time activities, reflections on being students. But how and in what order these were addressed and how much time was accorded to each of these depended on the young people we were interviewing, how they framed the discussion and their engagement in particular issues. Our approach in the interviews was to address the young people as authorities and experts about themselves and to encourage them to set the agenda picking up on issues which *they* raised and encouraging them to reflect and elaborate upon these. We wanted to find out from them what it was like being young people of their age, and the significance *they* attached to 'race,' gender and sexuality in their accounts of themselves and their relations with others (see Frosh et al. 2002).

We conceptualise the interviews not simply as 'instruments' for eliciting information from people but as social encounters or sites in which the participants were forging identities (see Pattman and Kehily 2004) This means we shall attend not just to what the interviewees say, but *the ways* they speak and present themselves, including emotional tone, body language and silences. We shall also reflect on our relations with our interviewees, for how they present themselves depends on the kinds of relations they develop with us, and, of course, we with them. (In this sense we understand the interviews as co-constructions.) In doing so we will refer briefly to some of the emotions our interviewees evoked in us and what these implied about them and the dynamics of the interview (see Hollway and Jefferson 2000, and Frosh et al. 2002).

### **Accounts of racism, and opposition to Indian girls around heterosexuality by black girls in Gandhi**

Usually we began the interviews after the introductions by asking the group what they liked or disliked about school, and it was in response to this that Lulu, a girl in the Gandhi group, mentioned being one of the few black people in her class and being treated with contempt by the other children: *'the others they treat you like, "who the hell?"; in class but then, you know at the end I know who I am. Why I am in this school. I'm here for education.'* When Rob enquired who the 'others' were, they turned out to be Indian pupils and their marginalisation by them, and notably by Indian girls, as well as by some Indian teachers, framed what became an extremely animated and emotionally charged interview. 'Race' and racism was thus put on the agenda early in the interview by the girls themselves.

In this interview the girls provided rich examples of subtle and blatant forms of racism perpetrated mainly by Indian girls against them, and when doing so, were highly engaged emotionally, raising their voices and talking over each other, with the insensitive microphone, which speakers were asked to place near their mouths, being whisked around from one person to another. When examples were being given and elaborated, it was never just one person talking, rather they all joined in. Clearly the stories they were telling of racism were common cultural ones which seemed to symbolise common experiences of marginalisation as young black women. These included accounts of:

- 1) the school's cake sale and how they were told by the Indian girls not to touch the cakes they were selling
- 2) how blacks were always assumed to be responsible for crimes committed at school,
- 3) how Indian not black children were applauded when they gave presentations in English lessons
- 4) how Indian pupils undermined black teachers by mispronouncing Zulu words when asked to be quiet or shouting *'Mielies'* (maize or corn on the cob) conjuring stereotypes of loud lower class black women selling food on the streets.

Though Indian boys were implicated in their accounts of racism and were presented as the main perpetrators undermining the authority of black teachers, the black girls' opposition to racism was mainly directed at Indian girls, and this seemed to be fuelled by anxieties about being constructed as less sexually attractive than them.

This was apparent when Rob referred to the Indian girls he had just interviewed. He was about to ask for their reactions to the claim by the Indian girls that people at school of different 'races' mixed as friends when Samantha asserted that Indian girls were 'more racist than [Indian] boys', and the other girls generally supported this. Their animosity to Indian girls centred, as we see in the passage below, around appearance –

and notably the attractiveness of their hair – and the Indian girls’ construction of themselves as ‘wonderful’ in relation to black girls.

- Rob:* I was interviewing a group of Indian girls actually (1)
- Samantha:* Girls are more racist than boys.
- Rob:* Are they?
- Fortunate:* Boys are better
- Fortunate = Ronda= Bongive:* Boys are better!
- Lulu:* you know one boy from our class, you saw him (1) He would talk to you, he will touch you and he will even take what you were eating and eat it.
- Rob:* Yeah, yeah.
- Lulu:* but the girls! They are racist.
- Bongive:* One boy in class, after English, we were like walking. Instead of him asking me, “Please can I pass” he swears me and I swear him back. He swear and I pushed him away.
- Rob:* A boy or girl?
- Bongive:* A boy.
- Rob:* Okay.
- Bongive:* I didn’t want to swear him back but I had to do it. I had to.
- Lulu:* the boys are not racist at all.
- Rob:* Why do you think that is?
- Lulu:* I don’t know, I don’t know.
- Bongive:* The girls, they think they have everything, they wear make-up, their long hair, and we got short hair.
- Lulu:* But one day I ask them, what’s so, so now you racist? What’s so wonderful? They told me their hair.
- Rob:* their hair?
- Lulu:* The African hair, Oh no! they don’t like it, and the only thing wonderful about them is they got nice hair, you know. And I said oh God! There’s nothing wonderful about you! I had to say that.
- Rob:* right.
- Lulu:* There is nothing wonderful about you, nothing, like we the same. I don’t care about, [loud angry tone] like I told them, I hate you all! Because of what they are doing to us.

Though Bongive provides what appears to be (in the context of the discussion) an example of an Indian boy’s racist behaviour, Lulu immediately affirms ‘the boys are not racist at all’, and Bongive does not contradict this but implicates Indian girls for being racist for constructing themselves as more attractive than black girls. While they provided examples of Indian boys’ racism, their constructions of them as ‘better’ or less racist or not at all racist served to accentuate the racism of Indian girls. This suggests they attached much importance to being *heterosexually* attractive and felt particularly troubled by the Indian girls being positioned as more attractive than them. Lulu denies this claiming ‘*there is nothing wonderful about you ... I don’t care about ...*’ but her loud, angry tone combined with the way she personalises her ‘*hate*’, referring to ‘*you all*’, as if they were present, suggested that she cared a great deal about this. The black girls’ anger towards Indian girls stemmed not only from concerns about being undermined by them, but also from their *own* sense of feeling less attractive. Though Lulu and Bongive were critical of the significance Indian girls attached to hair as a marker of their attraction and difference from black girls, Lulu still described Indian girls’ hair as ‘*nice*’ in implicit contrast, of course, to black girls’ hair: ‘*the only thing wonderful about them is they got nice hair*’.

In South Africa ‘beauty has been, and continues to be, violently raced or articulated through the medium of skin colour and hair texture’ (Motsemme 2003: 14), with whiteness or features such as straight hair which distinguish whites from blacks being emphasised and becoming icons of female attraction. Accounting for the attractions of ‘skin bleaching and hair straightening’ for black British women, Amina Mama (1995: 151) argues that these are ‘less about black women wanting to be white than about black women wanting to be attractive, especially to men in a patriarchal world that assumes beauty to be blonde and blue-eyed, and makes it imperative for women to be attractive enough to succeed with men’. Indians were criticised by the black girls

for 'acting white,' and, by implication rendering them – the black girls – less heterosexually attractive. The image of Indian girls 'flaunting' their straight hair was, for the Gandhi black girls, a powerful symbol of this.

### Fantatising about Indian boys rather than constructing them as racists

The black Gandhi girls' sense of marginalisation and exclusion around their identities as black heterosexual young women was made very explicit when they spoke about how much they longed to go to the school dance, (an important occasion also mentioned by the Indian girls and boys we interviewed at Gandhi), but could not go because no Indian boy would ask them out, and there were not enough black boys of their age to act as potential partners.

- Bongiwe:* Like now we will be having a dance. So now we don't have partners and we scared to ask them, a boy to ask with you because they won't go. They won't go. I'm sure.
- Rob:* the Indian boys?
- All:* Ja!
- Lulu:* Like you black and he's Indian, he won't go. Like we want to go. We really want to go, but we don't have partners. The problem is that we don't have partners.
- Mapopo:* It's not like we don't want to go to the dance. We do want to go but we don't have the right partner. There is African boys here but not enough for us.
- Bongiwe:* But, another Indian boy asked me but I'm not sure.
- Rob:* Not sure? Why won't you do it?
- Bongiwe:* Um (1)
- Lulu:* He's a player.
- Bongiwe:* I'm not sure, maybe he's just playing.
- Rob:* What do you mean?
- Bongiwe:* Joking ... But it's like, you say that nothing is impossible, but it's possible an Indian asks me out
- Rob:* And it's not possible for you to ask an Indian boy out?
- Lulu:* How! Please! Who do you think you are?

The dance was constructed by these girls as a celebration from which they were excluded, a celebration of heterosexual attraction, and especially female heterosexual attraction, with attendance depending on having a partner of the opposite sex, and in the case of girls, being propositioned by a boy. In contrast to the previous passage where the black girls criticised Indian girls for taking pride in their hair and subordinating them sexually, no criticisms were levelled at the Indian boys even though the implication was that it was the Indian boys' antipathy to having them as partners which prevented them from going to the dance. The black girls want to be 'asked' by Indian boys, indeed Bongiwe fantasises about the possibility of a serious request from one and *reluctantly* describes the Indian boy who did 'ask' her as 'maybe' 'just playing.' Significantly it is another girl, Lulu, who calls him a 'player,' and it may be that when Bongiwe refers to 'just playing' as 'joking' she is using joking euphemistically, avoiding the connotations which 'player' normally has of a male whose interest is purely sexual and who 'sleeps around' or 'plays around' with several females. Given the importance they attached to sexual attraction as an aspect of femininity and their everyday experiences of subordination and marginalisation at school, the idea that some Indian boys might find them attractive (in a non abusive way) seemed to be quite empowering, as we see in the following passage, for Samantha and Lulu. Notably, Samantha blames an Indian girl, not the Indian boy, for him turning 'against me'.

- Samantha:* One guy in my class, remember that day? One Indian boy, no, (1) Adeil, he told me that I've got sexy legs one day and there was this [Indian] girl who was like 'you are so pathetic,' and now everything I say now he's against me. She's always against me because boy who she was having a heart for, told me that I've got sexy legs. He likes my legs.
- Rob:* Alright. Yeah.
- Lulu:* And a [Indian] boy told me that you girls, with your jeans ... I think you're hot. And I take that as a compliment.

## Idealisations of whites and constructions of sexuality by black girls in Gandhi and Makgoba

### *Gandhi*

Though these girls did not raise possibilities of heterosexual relations with white boys – whites were much more distant figures for them than Indians, they were particularly excited talking about Danny K a young white male South African singer who had just released a song with Mandozo, a black South African rap artist. One of the girls had a poster of them advertising the new song which she took from her bag, and when I asked which one they liked, they all pointed to Danny K and spoke, with shrieks of excitement and laughter, about how attractive he was. The girls kept referring to him mixing with Mandozo, and there is no doubt that he was particularly attractive to them because he was a white man mixing with a black man. It was as if he was demonstrating that blacks could be equals to whites, and that the Indian students, whom the black girls despised for ridiculing the partnership and the posters depicting this, were trying to deny this.

He was also attractive for these girls because by mixing with a black man he was making himself ‘accessible’. For whites, as we see in the following passage, were, for these girls, both distant and idealised figures (indeed it was partly because they were distant figures that they were idealised). The girls had just spoken enthusiastically about a popular and controversial song by a black South African artist claiming Indians not whites were the main perpetrators of racism.

- Rob:* What makes you think that whites are not racist then? Do you come across any whites?
- Mapopo:* Another family, a white family, they even come to my house and say ‘Hello. How are you?’
- Rob:* Are there any whites at school?
- Interviewees:* No.
- Winnie:* I’ve been in the same crèche as whites. Ja. And they are so nice. They used to come to my house with me, eat and drink anything, anything.
- //
- Fortunate:* Now Indians they think they are white.
- Lulu:* You know what? Whites got everything. They are rich they are successful, but more than that, I don’t know why, they [Indians] are acting like them but ...
- Bongive:* And now, after apartheid they feel like they [Indians] are bigger now
- Lulu:* we are left alone down here and now they are up there, calling us names ... That’s what I can’t understand. Why do you people [Indians] treat Africans like that? Why? Why? Really. Maybe it’s my hair. If I had straight hair, then you will look at me differently.

The black girls at Gandhi constructed Indians as the new racists in post-apartheid South Africa, and as acting ‘white’ or asserting themselves as superior by denigrating blacks, with their attitudes to ‘African’ hair becoming, for Lulu and these girls, an important symbol of this. Lulu personalises this by directing a rhetorical question at ‘*you people*’, even though no Indians are present, and drawing attention to herself and her own experience by using the first person and asserting boldly that if ‘*I had straight hair, then you will look at me differently*’ [my emphases]. The implication was that whites were *naturally* affluent and successful. (The construction of whites as ‘naturally and immutably middle class’ and affluent in the post-apartheid era was shared by whites, themselves, as Salusbury and Foster (2004) found in interviews with white English speaking South Africans, keen to downplay the significance of ‘race’ and ‘racial’ exploitation as the basis of their power and wealth.) Rather than being blamed for being arrogant and snobbish in relation to blacks, as the Indians were, whites were constructed as distant yet also accessible, like friendly celebrity figures who might ‘*even come to my home*’ and greet them, and who, in their clearly infrequent associations with them, for example, in the distant past in a crèche, would engage and interact with them ‘*eat and drink, anything, anything*’.

It seems likely that they constructed Rob along these lines, especially as Rob in his role as interviewer was not aloof and detached but encouraged them to speak about issues which concerned them, showing interest and empathy. The girls spoke very positively about being interviewed, and notably the opportunities they had for ‘speaking our minds’. Yet the familiarity of all of them with the stories each one raised about ‘race,’ gender and sexuality and their feelings of marginalisation, suggested that these were common themes they discussed

among themselves. Presumably, then, it was because they were telling these stories to Rob that they felt they were ‘speaking our minds’. The girls did not treat him in either a deferential or a hostile way as an authoritarian figure, but were friendly and keen to tell him about their anxieties, concerns and pleasures, and made Rob feel very positively towards them. In his fieldnotes Rob describes the interview as ‘an amazing sociology lesson’, and comments not only on what he learnt from them about their ‘everyday experiences of racism and how they dealt with this’ but also how ‘privileged’ he felt that they were telling him, ‘a white, British, adult male outsider about this’. But he also felt ‘slightly uncomfortable’ when the girls were eulogising about whiteness and constructing Indians as the ‘new racists’, as if they were ‘so open and friendly with me because I was white’. Though she described the (different) black girls she interviewed at Gandhi as ‘pleasant’, Deevia felt much less passionate about her interview with them. They did not dominate and steer the interview in the ways the black girls Rob interviewed had done, nor did they display the same passion and support for each other, and conspicuously absent from Deevia’s interview were accounts of racism. Presumably this because Deevia was Indian and perhaps, also, (given the antipathy of the black girls Rob interviewed towards Indian girls) because she was a woman.

### *Makgoba*

In Makgoba, too, whites were idealised by the black young people – girls and boys – we interviewed, partly because they were distant figures for them. They were associated with wealth but were praised not blamed for this. Indians with whom they interacted not in school, but sometimes outside school were constructed as more affluent but, as in the interviews with black young people at Gandhi, were criticised for being racist. This was not, however, nearly such a pressing issue as it was for our black interviewees in Gandhi, and was only raised by the young people when they were asked specifically about their relations with young people of other ‘races.’

In the interview we discuss here, which we conducted with black girls at Makgoba, the girls reflected, near the end, on how being white made us – Rob as well as Deevia – celebrity figures in the school:

- Ronda:* They call you Umguna [white person] (laughter)  
*Prisca:* We’re not usually around white people and it’s so amazing  
*Ronda:* We look at white people and we think ‘Oh my God’.  
*Charity:* Cos you’re a girl the boys have noticed you [to Deevia] and cos you’re a man [to Rob] we girls have noticed you.

At Makgoba, we were lumped together as white, though distinguished by gender, and it seems, sexualised, despite both of us being middle aged (though Deevia was often mistaken for someone in her early 20s). In a previous interview Rob conducted with black girls at this school one of the girls asked for his phone number, making it clear, perhaps as a way of de-sexualising her request, that she wanted him (as a British person) as a ‘penfriend’. When Deevia asked why she was called white, Prisca switched from ‘we’ to ‘they,’ as if excluding her (Prisca), and explained, ‘*they [the pupils generally] can’t see any difference between you, maybe they think you are both white*’. This was presumably because we were being constructed as different and important and whiteness tended to symbolise and emphasise this.

As we have indicated, Deevia was constructed as Indian, not white, by blacks at Gandhi, as implied by the absence of criticisms levelled against Indians in the interviews she conducted with black girls and boys at Gandhi. In contrast to the black girls at Gandhi, the girls in this interview expressed admiration for Deevia’s hair, and two of them even started stroking it. This also was near the end of the interview when the girls were asking questions about us, the interviewers. For these black girls at Makgoba Indian females were much more distant figures than for the girls of Gandhi, and Deevia’s long hair was not seen as an expression of ‘Indian femininity’ associated with racism and everyday experiences of subordination and marginalisation, but, perhaps, as symbolising her celebrity status. This status was no doubt reinforced through their appropriation of TV. The black girls experienced people of other ‘races’ every day on TV, and made positive associations with sexual attraction and sexual behaviour and other ‘races’, drawing on the movies they watched. In this context Deevia with long black hair seemed, perhaps, like a movie star. The fact, too that our approach was informal, friendly and young person centred, made us *accessible* ‘celebrities,’ and made it possible for the girls to stroke Deevia’s hair.

In the interviews we conducted with black young people at Makgoba, questions we put about whether they would like to change ‘race’ for a day or whether they would like to be in a school with children of other ‘races’ produced very engaged discussions about whites, with whites being associated positively with affluence, fame, the work ethic, and white mothers with kindness and liberal sexual values. This happened not only in interviews Rob was conducting, but also ones which Deevia was taking. It was clear that for almost all the young black people we spoke to in Makgoba whites were fantasised as the ‘racial’ Other. As Fanon (1986) has argued, whiteness has come to symbolise for many blacks in the former African colonies and elsewhere cultural and economic superiority, and his account of people with ‘black skin’ and ‘white masks’ focuses on how through their emotional engagement with whiteness people come to construct themselves (generally negatively) as black. But it would be wrong to view these black young women simply as pawns of cultural imperialism. By constructing white mothers as liberal and understanding, they were contesting the ways they – black girls – were policed in their families especially in relation to sexuality.

### *Gandhi and Makgoba*

Concerns about parental silences and strictures around sexuality were commonly expressed in interviews with black girls in all the schools. These may have been highlighted for them as a result of various high profile sex educational campaigns in the media; for example the loveLife campaign in South Africa that communicates messages about sexuality and HIV/AIDS in entertaining ways through a range of popular media such as comic strips and TV drama has enlisted the support of well known politicians to speak in the national media and urge parents to ‘love them [their children] enough to talk about sex’ (Posel 2004: 61).

As we see in the following extract from the interview with the Makgoba girls, by distinguishing mothers or grandmothers of ‘other races’ from their own in terms of their attitudes towards young women and heterosexuality, they were able to engage in a powerful and subversive critique of their mothers’ authority. The angry and accusatory tone of Ronda’s grandmother on the topic of pregnancy, and the rhetorical use of pregnancy as a kind of threat, was clearly familiar to the other young people who laughed and made noises in recognition, and Prisca seemed to delight in mimicking and mocking her mother, much to the amusement of the others.

*Ronda:* She [a white girl] got pregnant and her mother was very happy she’s having a grandchild. It was so nice. But every time a black girl gets pregnant her parents will chase them away ... I’m living with my grandmother and she always tells me that whenever you get pregnant don’t ever come back [laughter and recognition from others]

*Prisca:* Yes because the other races they even allow their daughters’ boyfriends to enter the house and visit them like a friend like she’s a girl. Her mother won’t scold them, but when boys visit me my mother has those eyes [mock scary tone] [laughter from group] which look at them ‘*now why don’t they go home*’ [more laughter]. She won’t say anything to them but she has those funny looks she’s wondering, ‘*what are they doing in my house they have to go now*’.

For the black girls at Gandhi, Indians, and Indian girls in particular, were their main points of reference at school, as they tried to assert themselves in relation to them, partly through contesting racialised constructions of sexuality. But when it came to protesting against their mothers, they, like the Makgoba girls, drew on idealised parental attitudes to sexuality and their daughters which they associated with whites, as we see in the following. The association of black young women with high rates of pregnancy was also raised spontaneously, here, and addressed as a problem without problematising black girls.

*Samantha:* ... Why is it that white girls don’t get pregnant? Because they, the [black] teenagers are getting pregnant.

*Mapopo:* there is no communication between a child and the mothers. They lack communication, our parents. It’s hard. But the whites they communicate very well with their parents. I think.

*Lulhr:* Like me, I’m nineteen now you know. I’ve got a boyfriend, but my mother (1) Oh no! she doesn’t know.

Mapopo adds ‘I think’ after claiming whites ‘communicate very well with their parents’, as if aware that this is a view for which she has no first hand evidence.

### Idealised and critical constructions of whiteness by black girls at Dale Girls' High

We refer briefly here to the black girls we interviewed at Dale Girls' High and what they said about going to the formerly white school and their views of whiteness and how these compare with those of the black girls at Gandhi and Makgoba. Like the black girls at Gandhi and Makgoba, the black girls at Dale Girls' High spoke critically about their mothers' opposition to them 'going out' at night as well as having boyfriends, contrasting this with white mother–daughter relations. They constructed their school as white, associating this with affluence and with most of the teachers, but for them white privilege did not represent white virtues, as it did for the black girls at Gandhi and Makgoba, but discrimination against them and marginalisation. In her excellent ethnographic study of a formerly white school in Durban, Nadine Dolby (2001) writes about how teachers tried to assert 'standards', (of work and dress) associating these with white norms and values, in the face of the influx of black children. This may also have been happening at Dale Girls' High; what was certainly very clear to the black girls we interviewed there, like the black girls at Gandhi, was that their schools were not melting pots in a new South Africa, but places where 'racial' divisions and power relations were actively produced. The interview with the black girls at Dale Girls' High was dominated by examples they gave of school practices which contributed to this – the academic streaming of students, with black girls featuring overwhelmingly in the lower streams, the high profile given to girls receiving academic prizes and the virtual absence of black girls being publicly rewarded in school, and the tendency for teachers to associate black girls with trouble.

### Conflicts between expressing sexual desire and commitments to 'culture'

'Culture' was invoked (with pride) by the black girls who went to the 'racially' mixed schools as a resource which provided a positive sense of identification, in schools where they felt marginalised with other blacks or Africans. However, 'culture' was also deployed against some of these girls, understood as embracing whiteness. The black girls at Dale Girls' High complained of being called 'coconuts' by black outsiders for going to a white school and speaking English. As with Fanon's black skins/white masks, 'coconut' was a metaphor for perceived black identification with white – the coconut being brown on the outside and white inside. Girls could also be accused of violating 'culture' and embracing whiteness for being too sexual. It seemed that by criticising the ways they were policed by their parents/mothers in relation to sexuality, and by idealising white parents'/mothers' presumed liberalism, black girls risked being accused of cultural violation, as we see in the following extract from the Gandhi interview. In this there is a heated exchange in which some of the girls invoked 'culture' to refer to supposedly black or African values which they accuse girls like Lulu, who were most critical of their parents, of 'forgetting'. Given the significance they attached to 'culture' as a source of identification in their school, such an accusation was clearly a serious one.

- Lulu:* African parents are different from other parents because with African parents if you are standing with the boy it's wrong and it's showing no respect to others. You cannot stand with a boy, holding hands. No! No! [loud authoritarian voice] Don't stand with a boy because you are not showing any respect.
- Mapopo:* But that does not mean you must forget your culture, and where you come from.
- Lulu:* there is nothing wrong with that. [angry tone, speaking very quickly]
- Mapopo:* I understand that but you must respect your parents. Everybody is your parents. Everybody that is older than you is your parents.
- Lulu:* But there is nothing wrong standing with someone, a guy.
- Florence:* But holding a boy in front of an old person?
- Mapopo:* But you know what. Your parents will be ashamed and say, '*See my child standing with the boy? What will the neighbours say now?*'
- Samantha:* But hello? This is the new generation. You are talking about the new generation here.
- Mapopo:* Respect comes first and your religion comes first.
- Florence:* My mother's a nurse. But she doesn't talk about sex to me. She doesn't tell me about condoms, she doesn't tell me about AIDS. What she's going to tell me is that when she sees me with a guy, she's going to tell me, '*Hey you going to get sick, you going to get Aids! Hey you!*'
- Samantha:* they feel that if you tell your children about sex, it's like telling them, '*Go! Go do it!*'. That's how they think.

*Lulu.* That's being old-fashioned. That's being old-fashioned.

As research Rob has conducted elsewhere suggests, accusations about 'forgetting culture' are often directed at young black women and focus on sexuality (see, for example, Pattman 2005, on boys' opposition to 'salad girls' in Harare, and Pattman 2001, on criticisms of 'modern' women at a teachers' college in Zimbabwe). These draw on longstanding discourses in which black African females are idealised as repositories of 'culture' and sexualised (usually) and demonised if influenced by 'modernity' (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994). This results in contradictory demands on black girls and women, who are subject to conflicting pressures about looking good and behaving well in line with being 'acceptably African' or 'modern' (Lewis 2005: 19-20). As if identifying as 'modern', Lulu characterises black parents' concerns about talking about sexuality with their children as '*old fashioned*' and Samantha responding to Mapopo about the '*shame*' of being seen standing with a boy, retorts this is the '*new generation*'.

Amina Mama (1995: 137) argues that the motivation for blacks blaming other blacks for not being authentically black stems from 'their own inner racial insecurities' which are projected onto others. Following this line of analysis, it might be argued that blaming Lulu for 'forgetting culture' allowed some of the other girls who shared Lulu's misgivings about parental silences and policing regarding sexuality, to construct themselves as authentically black and minimise the tensions they felt as black girls as a result of voicing these. Thus Lulu's main critic, Mapopo, was, as we saw earlier, critical of the lack of 'communication' about sexuality between black mothers and children. Florence also seemed both to criticise public shows of heterosexual affection seen as 'culturally' unacceptable, while illustrating how problematic communication about sexuality was between parents and children because of cultural (?) constraints. Significantly it was just after Lulu had parodied her mother by mimicking her authoritarian injunction not to stand with a boy that the accusations against Lulu were made. It seems she was seen as 'going too far' in criticising her mother in this way.

## Conclusion

Our research suggests that 'race' is still a key category which forms of schooling actively produce in the post-apartheid era. With the unequal divisions of formerly white, formerly Indian and black township schools, schooling is structured in a way which reproduces inequalities which are highly racialised. Furthermore even in the same schools 'racial' divisions, according to the black students we spoke to, were being produced. We want to emphasise the importance here, when assessing the nature of schooling in contemporary South Africa, of addressing particular and different pupils as active agents and encouraging them to set the agenda. Schooling was experienced by these girls, even and perhaps especially by those who went to 'racially' mixed schools as reinforcing, not challenging, 'racial' divisions and inequalities. Where all the students were black and relatively poor and resources and facilities were basic as in the black township school or where the black students were not only numerical minorities but experienced minority status as in the formerly Indian and formerly white schools, 'race' became a major source of identification and differentiation for our black student interviewees. Addressing these girls as active agents, the paper is not about the passive reproduction of 'racial' inequalities through fixed patterns and structures of schooling, but focuses on how the girls, themselves, construct their identities and negotiate spaces for themselves (in conditions not of their own choosing and where they feel undermined) drawing on versions of 'race' and sexuality as powerful resources.

'Race' and sexuality were introduced as important themes in the interviews by the black girls themselves. They were not addressed separately in their accounts but were interlinked and intertwined. It was in relation to heterosexuality that the black girls at Gandhi spoke with most engagement about experiences of marginalisation and racism; sexuality became a focal point for them through which they contested the racism which permeated their everyday lives. Constructing themselves as heterosexually attractive their anger was gendered, directed at Indian girls as their oppressors, not Indian boys as their, albeit unlikely, admirers. And discourses which idealised whiteness were invoked by black girls in all the schools to resist the ways they were policed (notably by their mothers) through sexuality.

As we mentioned in the Introduction studies on black girls and sexuality in Africa have tended to focus on their exploitation and abuse. Our interviews with black girls showed how sexuality was a source of anxiety and consternation for them, but contrary to the impression conveyed by the focus of such studies and contrary to what we might expect based on Vasu Reddy's description of the polarisation of associations between sexuality in Africa and the West, how it was a source, also, of much pleasure. Through their opposition to racialised

constructions of heterosexual attraction which rendered them unattractive, through fantasising about being asked out by Indian boys and sexually idolising Danny K, the black girls at Gandhi were asserting themselves as desiring and desirable subjects, and associating sexuality with suffering largely because they were not being addressed or recognised as these. For the black girls in Gandhi, Makgoba and Dale Girls' High, fantasies about white liberal parents reflected associations of sexuality with desire, and with conflict relating to the policing of desire by their parents and mothers. Even if they hardly interacted with whites, like the black girls at Gandhi and Makgoba, they appropriated and idealised media images of sexuality, white girls and their parents in ways which were empowering to them. As Deborah Posel (2004) argues, 'for black youth – particularly women – asserting a sexualised "freedom" may be a statement of the rupture between the apartheid and post-apartheid generations, as much as a symptom of the erosion of parental authority'. This did not imply that these girls were identifying symbolically with whites in ways which made them attach less significance to 'race'. That their expressions and assertions of sexual desire were so racialised points to the significance not only of heterosexuality but also 'race' as powerful and intersecting markers of their identities.

While resistances to 'black' forms of parental control were evident in all the interviews we conducted with black girls in the mixed and the black township schools, it was clear, in the interview with the Gandhi girls that girls engaging in this and advocating freedoms – especially if these were linked to sexuality and expressions of desire – ran the risk of being accused of cultural violation. 'Culture' was deployed not only as a source of empowerment by black girls who felt 'racially' marginalised, but also as an instrument of control and regulation in relation to other black girls.

Sexuality, thus, was significant for these different black girls we interviewed in complex ways, associated with desire and pleasure as well as policing and control, usually by parents and mothers but sometimes also by other black girls. Sexuality was also a medium through which they asserted themselves and through which they were subordinated. Above all, sexuality emerged in the interviews with the black girls as a key aspect of their identities which always intersected with 'race.'

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