Afrikaner, nevertheless: Stigma, shame & the sociology of cultural trauma

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PART 4: Afrikaner Youth at School
11. Desegregation and Integration at Schools

11.1 INTRODUCTION
In this part, I compare how white Afrikaans students at two high schools in Cape Town renegotiate and remake whiteness and their Afrikaans identities. As in the parts about work and living, schools are the institutional backdrop to the stories about identity that I tell. One school has mainly upper-class students, while the other one has mainly lower-middle-class students. I will explore how race, class, and gender influence the process of race and identity formation at the schools. In this theoretical introduction, I shortly summarize how the educational landscape of South Africa has been remade since 1994, and how the educational literature studies the formation of white youth identity. I show that educational reform, desegregation, and white flight have affected formerly white schools very differently. In cities like Cape Town, limited desegregation at elite schools and resegregation at lower-middle-class schools has produced a radically different context for racial integration and identity construction for upper- and lower-middle-class whites. However, in the literature on white youth identity in South Africa, the relationship between class and race is rarely explicated, partly because of the assumption that whiteness can be equated with privilege. The role of gender and emotions is stressed by various authors but, in general, undertheorized. Nevertheless, it evidently plays a role in South African society because of the specific burden on young Afrikaners after apartheid.

11.2 EDUCATION REFORM IN SOUTH AFRICA
To situate the schools that form the backdrop of this study, it is necessary to first discuss the educational landscape in South Africa and how it changed after 1994. The opportunities for educational reform and racial integration in the country after the first democratic election in 1994 were both substantial and daunting. South Africa’s relatively high educational standards, good educational infrastructure, and considerable resources could all be marshaled
to affect change. The challenge was daunting as educational reform would have to overhaul a school system designed for the separation of races and the reproduction of inequality. Under the Bantu Education Act from 1953 to 1990, blacks and coloureds received an education that was grossly inferior to that provided to whites. The system was unequal, authoritarian, and racist, providing first-class schools for the white population and disturbingly low-quality schools for the majority black and coloured population (Carrim, 1998).

But even before the democratic transition, education reform was thwarted. In the last days of apartheid, the National Party government initiated privatization to protect the quality of the privileged white educational institutions in the post-apartheid years. Policies dressed up as cost savings led to semi-privatization of white schools. Because Afrikaans schools were traditionally state schools while English schools predominantly private, these policies primarily affected Afrikaans schools. The policies involved the creation of school governance bodies in every school with responsibilities for admission and language policies, the school ethos, and the fees used to supplement state subsidies. These bodies, elected by the parents, also assumed ownership of the fixed property and equipment of the school (Dolby, 2002; Fiske & Ladd, 2004). Since the transition to democracy, neoliberal educational reforms have further emphasized democratization through decentralization. Educational policies stressed economic efficiency, cost market-led reform, and fiscal austerity over the pursuit of redress or fight against inequality (Linda Chisholm & Fuller, 1996; De Clercq, 1997; Oldfield, 2002; Schneider, 2003). Overall, expenditures on education dropped. Because white parents increasingly paid for their children’s schools, the racial and regional divide between advantaged and disadvantaged schools widened (Karlsson, Mc Pherson, & Pampallis, 2002; Lemon, 2005).

**DESEGREGATION AND INTEGRATION AT FORMERLY AFRIKAANS SCHOOLS**

Since 1994, desegregation and integration in schools are issues primarily at play in formerly white schools where high educational standards attract many new black and coloured students. The ANC government struggled to address segregation and integration because it had limited control over educational institutions (Christie, 2006; Moodley & Adam, 2000; Motala & Singh, 2002). Nevertheless, continuing efforts to achieve control, for instance over language policies to increase access, have resulted in significant but uneven desegregation at formerly white schools. The large majority of formerly Afrikaans schools have changed to double-medium or single-medium English, partly through pressure from the educational department. The challenge remains for the government to push beyond desegregation and devise strategies for integration at schools.

The most important mechanism by which formerly white Afrikaans schools have been able to resist and moderate the effects of desegregation is
through fees and admission policies (Linda Chisholm, 2004a). School-governing bodies are able to make desegregation a class issue. High fees and rules of admission are used to keep schools predominantly white, although most white schools admitted at least a quarter to a fifth of non-white students. The ANC tries to counter these efforts through a fee-exemption policy but has not been very successful. This first challenge is the same in most of the country, but in relation to the second mechanism, Cape Town is different. The second mechanism is the language policy of a school that has played an important role in most parts of the country, but less so in Cape Town because the coloured population speaks Afrikaans. Language policy has been particularly contentious at former single-medium Afrikaans schools, because the use of Afrikaans as the single language can be exclusionary to many non-Afrikaans speakers in South Africa. Afrikaners have argued on a consistent basis—although with various legal arguments—that educational reform and desegregation should not be incompatible with the protection of language rights at their educational institutions (Jansen, 2002; Sayed, 2002).

White middle-class resistance against reform, desegregation, and integration remains a problem (Lemon, 2005). Resistance to desegregation can be explained by racist fears but also from a perceived threat of the burden of integration (once the school has desegregated) among white parents and school management. Schools that attract a diverse student body have considerable adjustments to make financially, culturally, and linguistically. The ANC government has hardly begun to address the issue of integration at schools. The Minister of Education Naledi Pandor said that “integration continues to be the least discussed and most ignored aspect of education today” (Nkomo, McKinney, & Chisholm, 2004, p. 11). Integration can be understood narrowly in relation to structural school characteristics like language policy and student composition, but also more broadly in relation to social relations and racial attitudes among white youth and staff (Johnson, 2007; Nkomo et al., 2004). It is the latter definition that is central in my research. Although I take structural indicators of integration into account, like the racial composition of a school, my interest is in “soft” indicators like cross-racial attitudes and relationships. These indicators are not always aligned. For instance, friendships tend to be most segregated at moderately heterogeneous schools (Moody, 2001).

One consequence of the (perceived) burden of integration is that it can lead to white flight and resegregation, a development that so far has not received much attention in South Africa. However, American research shows that if schools reach a certain tipping point in the racial balance of students, white students start to avoid such schools (Giles, 1978; Schelling, 1971). Evidence suggests, both anecdotal and academic, that white flight from desegregated schools in South Africa is an issue in cities like Cape Town, Durban, and Pretoria. In separate case studies, both Chisholm and Dolby
show how schools near Durban, which they researched and qualified as desegregating and integrating in the mid-1990s, have subsequently resegregated and were abandoned by the white lower-middle class by the mid-2000s (Linda Chisholm, 2004b; Dolby, 2001b). My own case studies in Cape Town suggest the same has happened there with various formerly white lower-middle-class schools. Because both desegregation and resegregation affects middle-class schools sooner than elite schools, class has a strong mediating influence on the experience of larger patterns of racial integration.

11.3 AN INTERSECTONAL ANALYSIS OF ADOLESCENCE

Ethnographic research in the United States presents strong evidence of the intersection of whiteness and class at schools. Pamela compares an elite, white-majority school with a school that has a lower-class white minority. She reveals the major impact of context on the shaping of white racial identities of adolescents. In both schools, race is a source of pride, introspection, and negation. But the level of racial interaction impacts on the awareness of racial identity, issues of privilege and inequality, and an understanding of the other group’s historical and social experiences (Pamela, 2002). In his study of white kids in a middle school in a low-income urban area, Morris explores the intersection of whiteness and gender with inequality. His attention for student interaction and peer culture reveal how whiteness in this context did not represent power or privilege nor was it founded on domination (Morris, 2006). Finally, the impact of whiteness on elite institutions is again different. At a predominantly white, well-to-do school in the United States, Lewis shows how the new ideology of color-blind racism has taken hold, but that “explicit color-blind ‘race talk’ masked an underlying reality of racialized practices and color-conscious understandings that not only had direct impact on students of color at the school, but also have implications for race relations more broadly” (A. E. Lewis, 2001, p. 781). All three studies show how race and class, at least in the United States, interact in schools and influence in different ways the everyday process of race making.

In South Africa, Soudien has studied the influence of class and whiteness on identity formation. In a series of studies that are marked by their psychological insight, he emphasizes the variety of responses among privileged white youth to the democratic transition. Soudien’s major concern is how privilege and the quest for status make students “invest in” or “disinvest from” old styles of whiteness. He presents three different groups of youth who each have more or less resisting responses to the new South Africa. The studies were done in various schools in the Western Cape, including former Afrikaans schools (Soudien, 2007, 2010). Most schools, Soudien shows, hardly deal with race and difference, at least in the curricula. He argues that research should focus on peer groups, and concludes that most white students have troubled identities and struggle with who they are.
and who they ought to be (Soudien, 2001). Privileged students find it hard to discard the familiarity of their racial label. Doubts about the meaning of the apartheid heritage plague them and make them unsure about what the meaning is of their race and culture, where they belong, and what should be disregarded or revalued.

For lower-middle-class white youth, Soudien notes, the situation is different from the upper class. They often attend schools that have become fragile institutions but nevertheless still have a strong white culture. Such schools, Soudien suggests, building on research by Weider, produce “strong formal identities” and make the youth “fiercely protective” of their school. At the same time, they accept the identities of new South Africans (Weider, 2003 in Soudien, 2007). Soudien writes: “they are in much more active dialogue with the conditions of their socialization than one might assume” (Soudien, 2007, p. 100). Dolby, in her study of a resegregated middle-class, formerly white school in Durban, is less forgiving toward the white lower middle class. Although her study suggests that youth is trying to break away from old racial stereotypes and construct an identity by emphasizing global culture and taste preferences, she argues that white students practice a “strategy of resentment” in which they present themselves as victims in the new South Africa (Dolby, 2001a). Dolby emphasizes the role of negative emotions in relation to the loss of privilege, their lack of empathy for historical black suffering, and the fact that most want to leave the country.

Jansen, in his study of young Afrikaners, specifically highlights the role of emotions in the formation of Afrikaner youth identities. For him, the central question in the study of Afrikaner youth is: Why do so many young Afrikaners, who were born after apartheid, still act and talk as if they were still there? He argues that white Afrikaans youth have a unique position vis-à-vis the history of apartheid. Inspired by studies of second-generation youth of Holocaust perpetrators, Jansen suggests that the problem is what he calls “indirect knowledge.” He argues that emotions play an important role because “knowledge does not transmit as neutral, technical, fact-based information from one generation to the next; it is embedded with dominant belief systems that give the knowledge meaning, emotion, and authority” (Jansen, 2009, p. 60). Emotions, he writes, can cloud interpretation. The loss that comes with change, the sense of bitterness, and anger after the defeat of apartheid, they all make youth interpret every change as a possible threat to the collective. Institutions like schools, but also church and family, provide tight circles of socialization that pass knowledge onto the youth about the past that is incomplete and wrong. Although we can argue with Jansen’s theory of socialization, and the specific relationship between knowledge and emotions, the important point is that youth identity is shaped by both knowledge and emotions.
Both Jansen and Soudien hint at the importance of gender in their studies but neither of them actively differentiates the influence of gender in relation to whiteness, class and emotions. Soudien notes that some girls have more empathy and compassion than the boys, and that gender therefore is important. Jansen also emphasizes the role of patriarchy on masculine identities; he asserts that it is the young Afrikaner males who experience the most problems. More than girls, boys try to reclaim the past and bolster their pride, while at the same time feel humiliated.

But a more systematic comparison of these gender differences is necessary. Boys and girls have different places and roles in schools. Boys, for instance, as Prendergast shows, dominate the (playground) space through an aggressive, physical masculinity, while Barrie Thorne emphasizes the social processes of groups and role play in the formation of gender (Prendergast, 1996; Thorne, 1993). Studies of masculine subcultures in school have revealed the social dynamic of the process of putting on “credible manhood acts,” activities that show boys’ manliness (Warren, 1997). Such studies show the fine-grained production and negotiation of masculinities as configurations of practice. For instance, girls tend to play in small groups that stress cooperation and intimacy, whereas boys play in larger groups that are more competitive, goal-directed, and rule-guided (Lever, 1978). Boys also learn that they can impress peers if they break rules and talk back to teachers (A. A. Ferguson, 2000). Maybe most importantly is that these gender differences are analysed within the context of the peer group, as the peer group becomes the dominant socialization context during adolescence (Giordano, 2003).

Finally, there are good reasons to believe that there exists a strong relationship between gender and emotions in contentious processes such as desegregation, integration and resegregation (Frosh, Phoenix, & Pattman, 2003; Kindlon et al., 2000). Particularly if individual differences among youth can neither be explained by race or class, gender by way of emotions is a promising alternative (Bendelow & Mayall, 2000). There is, for instance, a strong connection between masculinity ideals and the regulation of emotions. High-status boys ostracize boys who cry, and hence boys learn to regulate their emotions to keep up their manhood acts (McGuffey & Rich, 1999). During sports at school, boys are taught not to express their emotions, particularly fear and pain (Curry, 1993; Messner, 1992). They are taught to signify manhood through the display of fighting spirit. In Australia, similarly to South Africa, the practice of rugby football centers on domination, aggression, ruthless competitiveness, and giving everything for the school (Light & Kirk, 2000). By contrast, research showed that girls use emotional language to navigate the various social relationships in schools (C. Gilligan et al., 1989).
11.4 COMPARATIVE FRAMEWORK AND QUESTIONS

In the next two chapters, I present a comparative ethnographic case study of two youth groups in two different *hoërskole*, or high schools: De La Rey and Die Groot Trek. The first school, De La Rey, is a predominantly white, Afrikaans elite institution. Since 1994, the school has only moderately changed and has less than 25 percent coloured and black students. De La Rey is a still a very traditional Afrikaans school. Many of the parents and even grandparents of the white Afrikaans students had also gone to the school. It is a selective institution and the school charges high school fees. Nevertheless, desegregation did change the organization of the school after 1994. What we will explore is the unevenness of change and the limits of change. Studying the process of change helps us to see how a school’s culture shapes students hearts and minds. Only through an ethnographic study that takes the context serious can we answer the question of how students’ opinions connect (if at all) to their experiences at school. In the analysis, I focus on students of class H and D, and only a few from class R.

The second school, Die Groot Trek, is a lower-middle-class school where teaching occurs both in Afrikaans and English. Until recently, the school offered a very similar education to De La Rey, including an extensive extracurricular program of cultural activities and sports. Although more middle class than De La Rey, Die Groot Trek was known for its strong military tradition and discipline. The rugby team also won prestigious prices in the Western Cape. However, in the last few years this school has not only desegregated but also seen its white Afrikaans students disappear. The resegregating school forms the backdrop for the study of changing youth identities among white, Afrikaans-speaking youth. The process of integration at schools is the essential sociological context for the intersectional analysis that takes race, class, and gender serious.

At both school, I focus on small peer groups that attend the same class in the 11th grade. At De La Rey, this is a group of girls in the class with the highest grades. I refer every now and then to the boys, but argue that the gender differences at the school should not be overstated. The focus is on the stories and opinions of the girls. At Die Groot Trek, the focus is on a small group of boys that sit in the same class. Because I found the gender differences at Die Groot Trek very strong, I contrast in this chapter the talk of the boys with that of the girls in the same class.

The influence of the school is not independent from the overall social and geographical location of the children’s environment. But schools are not just locations but sites of social interaction. As institutions, they actively influence the process of socialization formally and informally. The student composition, the racial mix, the rules and regulations, and the curricula all influence and shape the cultural, social and racial identities of children.
Of both groups of young Afrikaners, I study their talk, experiences, and feelings, and I analyze the discourses they use to construct their identity, how they create boundaries between themselves and other races, and how they relate to their Afrikaner identity, the apartheid past, and their future in South Africa. Finally, it is good to state that although the story of these chapters focus on two specific groups, interviews have been done with a much wider group of students and members of staff. The two leading questions for these chapters are: How do schools as educational institutions shape the changing discourses of white, Afrikaans-speaking youth on identity, race, and ethnicity; and how do race, class, and gender influence the process of racial formation at the specific schools, and what is the role of emotions therein?
12. Privilege and Guilt

12.1 THE STORY OF SANDRA

“I am glad that I have opportunities,” Sandra says, “because I know I will do something with mine.” Sandra is a bright, young Afrikaans girl who sits in class H, which is the honors class of grade 11 at an Afrikaans elite school, Hoërskool De La Rey. She appreciates her school and Cape Town. She feels the school has a “unique” and “diverse” community and she loves the “cosmopolitan” character of the city. She says:

I would say the majority of South Africa is still bitter about apartheid, even though we want to deny it. But it is no longer here at school. It doesn’t show. It isn’t an issue here. People don’t base their prejudice or judgment on your skin color or nationality. They base it on your personality. Some coloureds have a similar personality or view, and some people don’t like that view. So it is not about skin color, but views. It is the personality that counts. And I think that was definitely not the case during apartheid, even though we would like to deny it. I don’t think 20 years is enough to wipe away all that business, and yes, that shows in the rest of South Africa. But here we are all basically the same.

Sandra likes to talk about the benefits of the school’s newfound diversity. Like most girls in her class, being Afrikaans is not interesting. She unselfconsciously labels herself as “more European” and she has little trouble entertaining the thought that the Afrikaners might not belong in Africa. Belonging just isn’t an issue for her. She disconnects herself from nationalist Afrikaners and their argument that Afrikaners are the first white tribe in Africa. She loves her life and she appears at home in the new “diverse” South Africa.

Alas, that image displays some fault lines. When she talks about being white in the new South Africa, she tells a different story. Sandra is self-
conscious about the color of her white skin, particularly, when there are “black” people around (all non-whites, as she describes it). This is connected to her privileged lifestyle. The “black” people she refers to are the coloured workers at her school who do the gardening and maintenance, or work as security guards and parking assistants in the neighborhood. She has little contact with them, but she often feels stared at. She feels they watch her.

I know they think (of me) as this little rich girl that has an education and a future. They know they… that many are not going to have an effect on the world like I will do. They will have an effect on me, but not on the world, even when it is a negative effect. ... They just sit there and resent, because that is all they do.

Sandra lives a privileged life. Her experiences with coloureds are defined by the continuing unequal racial relationships. As a consequence, she feels that most coloured workers resent her for her privileges and are jealous of her. Of course, she does not really know if they resent her; she merely projects all those thoughts and feelings onto racial others. There is little evidence that Sandra has any meaningful interaction with them. “But what do I know,” she asks, “because I really don’t understand them all that well. ... Sometimes I feel guilty but I do not know if that is still a good thing.” The workers’ presence, in combination with her assumptions, make Sandra feel guilty, and she legitimizes her privileged position. She is ambivalent about her happy life. Privilege does not come without guilt. While she likes to believe in diversity, can it coincide with her privileged white position?

12.2 DESEGREGATION BUT NOT INTEGRATION

Hoërskool De La Rey breathes more tradition and continuity than change: it is a three-centuries-old Dutch colonial-style building that displays its traditions. The marks of history are everywhere. The corridors are decorated with a century’s worth of pictures of all the sports teams. Foremost are the boy’s rugby teams, standing tall in their uniforms, along with the girl’s netball teams, and the swimming teams. There is also a collection of portraits depicting all the headmasters of the school, reaching back for more than a century. They look stern, white, and male. Today, Hoërskool De La Rey still has a white, male principal with executive powers. De La Rey is still predominantly white and Afrikaans-speaking and still exhibits strict discipline and a traditional leadership style. Students get trained to achieve top grades and move on to elite universities. Competition and excellence are its most important values. Indeed, many pillars of the school’s tradition have stayed the same since 1994.

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

For all its traditions, De La Rey has had to change and change, has been incremental and controlled. While the school has remained an elite, single-
medium Afrikaans school, which means that Afrikaans is the only language of instruction, the school officially desegregated in 1992. Non-white staff is employed and non-white students are now admitted to the school. Indeed, the change has reached far, as shown by the new coloured female vice-principal, hired in 2007, and the coloured hoofseun elected in 2008 (a star of the rugby team). To the outside world, De La Rey has definitely altered. But the question is not whether De La Rey has desegregated, but why this change has been so uneven and limited. The admittance of coloured students has been highly selective and tightly regulated. The school admits most coloured students based on sports criteria. Only a few are accepted on other criteria like academic merit or musical talent. Almost 20 years after desegregation, this result is quite unique for a school in the inner city of Cape Town. Most former Afrikaans schools in the city that desegregated in the early 1990s do not have any white students anymore.

However, De La Rey has not had white flight from the school, and it has not resegregated to an all-black or coloured school. There are three reasons for this. First, the school has expanded its catchment area and extended the operation of their boys and girls hostels. The hostels now house students from all over the Western Cape. Second, the school assures that it attracts only a limited amount of specifically selected Afrikaans-speaking coloured students. Most of them obtain a sports bursary and boost the sports reputation of the school, which is still an important way to remain competitive in the educational market. Third, and most importantly, the school started to operate an affordable and elaborate bus system that transports students to the school from white neighborhoods and areas as far away as Langebaan on the West Coast (nearly an hour drive outside of Cape Town). The bus system has offered students, who normally would have been too far from the school, a chance to go to De La Rey. The bus system negatively affects other schools by facilitating white flight in these locales. The student body of De La Rey, therefore, consists of many whites who have avoided neighborhood schools that have a “bad reputation” (another term often used for schools with a large influx of non-white students), and gifted coloureds.

The Fragile Balance of Whiteness
In the unequal and competitive educational landscape of post-apartheid South Africa, reputation management is essential for schools, and reputation is strongly based on the racial composition of the school. So far, De La Rey has remained a traditional, mostly white, and single-medium Afrikaans school, 15 years after apartheid, and even obtained maximum occupancy. Nevertheless, the school’s management is continuously aware of the fragility of this position and the need to keep up its (racial) reputation in competition with other schools. The school manages its (racial) reputation largely through
two types of policies. First, the school has installed a mix of policies that helps to limit the possible influx of coloured students. Such exclusionary policies are often gauged in economic language about supply and demand and justified in talk about the need to keep up “standards.” Second, to handle diversity, the management strongly regulates racial life inside the school by stratifying school classes. This process produces a racial hierarchy that isolates most white students from coloured students. Below I explain these two mechanisms further.

First, the school simultaneously controls the admissions process and tries to obscure the ethnic composition of its student body. Because admission cannot be based on racial or ethnic criteria anymore, a new language is used to legitimize the selection of students, and to accept the preferred white Afrikaans students. At De La Rey, and many other former Afrikaans schools, admission criteria are now wrapped in the economic language of “benchmarks,” “supply and demand,” and the need to uphold “standards.” For instance, the headmaster likes to explain his selection and educational philosophy by arguing that prospective students should all have the “same standards.” The language of standards works well, because of its purported ring of neutrality. But in application, the racial logic of this talk becomes evident. Take the headmaster’s example of music education that he uses to explain his educational philosophy. De La Rey is well known for its department of drama and music, but it only teaches classical music. He says:

You achieve the best education if people who have the same standards surround you. For me it would be impossible to put people who … experience hip-hop in the same class as those who study classical music, like Bach and Beethoven. … Those are two different influences. It is a question of supply and demand: what does the cultural (ethos) of De La Rey offer? This will determine who is interested in De La Rey. This is a natural process. Other people, who have an interest in hip-hop or rock, if I may use that example … If De La Rey has a focus on classical music, then we will attract the candidates who have an interest in that, a love for and socialization in this. But the school that is in Harlem or New York, like the school from the movie “Fame,” they will attract the rock ‘n’ roll and hip-hop youth.

By drawing a contrast between Harlem and Cape Town and between classical music and hip-hop, the racial logic of the headmaster is evident. Students who “experience hip-hop,” he argues, do not belong together with students who “study classical music.” The headmaster deemphasizes his own role in the selection process. Instead, he presents the process as an economic process—a process in which the school offers a certain product and where rules of supply and demand simply play out. In other words, the school operates in the educational “market” and has its “natural” customers.

Second, the educational philosophy that prescribes students with the same standards to learn together has resulted in internal segregation as the
preferred way of dealing with diversity. There is a hierarchy of classes in De La Rey with strong racial repercussions. Once admitted to the school, the students follow different academic tracks. For instance, in grade 11, the school has four classes, named after the first letter of the name of the school: H(oerskool) D(e) L(a) R(ey). The H-class is the honors class for students who have both Afrikaans and English as first-language, and take mathematics at the highest academic level. Students of color, many of whom are selected for their athletic talents and recipient of a bursary, often perform poorly academically. They are selected to go into the lowest class, the R class, with the poorest-performing students. In 2007, the R class had 30 students, of which there were only 7 whites. The other three classes together had only three students of color. De La Rey thus creates segregation within a desegregated school; it produces a racialized hierarchy in school that is never openly addressed in school, but rather denied or hidden. Instead, the management proudly presents the school as traditional Afrikaans and Christian.

12.3 IDENTITY TALK
Students sketch a very different picture of school community than the management. They present themselves as liberal and open-minded. Their identity talk is not primarily about race, or even their Afrikaner identity. Instead, they stress that they like diversity and want everybody to be treated the same. This does not mean they don’t see difference. There is a subtle secondary discourse that mixes lifestyle groups with stereotypes of the different classes. While the “discourse of diversity” suggests that all students are seen as equal, the differences embedded in the second discourse suggest there is a rather strong racial hierarchy at the school.

CELEBRATING DIVERSITY
Students are very positive about the school and celebrate its good atmosphere. Both girls and boys paint an image of the school as a progressive and open place. They call it “unique,” “liberal” and “special.” They think it has a lot of “respect for culture” and that “everybody” can come to the school. Students can be “who they are” and “everybody is accepted” and “treated the same.” Everybody “talks to each other” and is “flexible” and “an individual”—nobody “judges you.” Annelie says:

I wouldn’t say we experience differences naturally … we don’t see any differences, I mean, apart from the color of our skin, nothing else is really different. They play with us the same sports, they do the same things. ... We tend to learn from each other. We listen to the same things. They have the same things, they wear the same clothes, so there’s nothing really different. ... We’re together a lot. We work in the same groups, we work with the coloureds; they work with us. We don’t discriminate against anyone. So I think because were so open to other cultures, we tend to be a very … free.
Marius also likes to think of himself as open minded. He says:

> It is like a small society in my school basically … so diverse, so unique. We all sort of live in harmony with each other. And there is never a big fight or anything. It is very nice actually. I really enjoy it here.

Most students share the views of Annelie and Marius. They say they are part of a unique and diverse student body. Certainly, there is an element of flattering self-presentation here, but such a discourse is nevertheless remarkably distinct from the focus of the management on traditions, being Afrikaans and Christian. Students create an image of the school that is all their own. They argue that school embodies the values with which they want to identify. Many feel the school as a community is strongly unified with few subgroups that really matter. They say that the school has few cliques and no one gets bullied. It is a “close knit” school where “everybody is friends” and “everybody stands together.”

Students argue that the open school spirit assures that everybody receives equal treatment, no matter what race or religion. What contributes to the positive and open spirit, they say, is the school’s limited size. De La Rey has a student population of only 600 students, which would make it possible that “everybody knows everybody” and that everybody in the school is an “equal member.” The curriculum also matters. The students say that the many different activities offered by the school assure equality between everyone because of the balance in the curriculum between academia, sports, and extracurriculum activities like acting and music.

There is another thread running through the students’ discourse and self-presentation: they link the image they have of the school and themselves to the broader geographical area of where they live: Cape Town. Students connect a positive, liberal view of the school with idealistic images of Cape Town. They see it as a progressive city. Most of all, they feel the city is different from other parts of South Africa, like the former South African capital Pretoria or the platteland, the countryside. Sandra says:

> Because it is also in Cape Town, the school allows much more flexibility for your own personality and your own identity. I mean, our motto is “Wees jouself,” yeah … be yourself. And people do live up to that in this school. You are not an outcast because you do not dress the same. And because you do not talk the same, or think the same....When you come here, you can’t really be like all your friends, because all your friends are different. So, I was forced to create my own identity, to form it. And in that way I cannot thank the school enough.

Students like Sandra say that Cape Town is “cosmopolitan” and has no “racist stuff.” They think the city allows you to develop your identity without “any culture forced upon you.”
Although the progressive image of the school and the city do not necessarily contradict with the traditional Afrikaans and Christian image, the emphasis is markedly different. Students are not unaware of this discrepancy, and actively negotiate the contradictions between the various images. They are conscious of the school’s history and feel Afrikaans schools have a stigma for being conservative and racist. They contrast the image of a traditional Afrikaner school with their own ideas of their school. Maretha says:

I actually think it is a very open-minded and liberal school. Because it is still Afrikaans, and it has a lot of different people in it, and yet they get along. Ja...Other people might be prone to think, because it was Afrikaners who implemented apartheid that the Afrikaner is like the Boer—conservative, narrow minded—only one way is right ... It is actually not like that at all.

Students like Maretha refute outside perceptions that stigmatize the school as conservative Afrikaans. Others bridge the contradiction by saying that the school has the best of both worlds: it has both conservative and liberal elements. They say that in some ways the school still has to “modernize” but that the students have already become more “international” and “English.” What is important to note is that the students present the school in a way that makes them feel they belong; that makes them want to belong to the school. The school’s image that they present is the one they like to present of themselves. All this does not mean that students do not see difference between groups. For this, they have another discourse that, at least in part, contradicts the first.

**Lifestyle and Racial Hierarchy**

At De La Rey, lifestyle markers and academic selection produce a subtle racial hierarchy. For an elite school with competitive standards, it should be no surprise that students measure each other, and that difference is also connected to lifestyle. Most students have extensive resources to develop lifestyles around their various pursuits, like music and sport. This has produced a firm sense of different groups in school that is widely shared among students. Distinctions are made between the following groups: first is the most popular group at school, “the jocks,” who are athletes. They are followed by “the surfers,” who are people that surf and body board and often live near the beach in Northern Cape Town. The next group is the city kids who live in downtown Cape Town and are music fans and often go to see bands. Then, there are “the nerds,” students who are seen as academic achievers or simply perform well academically. Finally, the smokers or rebels are a group of primarily boys who are known as troublemakers.

The students are also assigned different classes based on academic merit, and these classes hold a hierarchical ordering. Class H is generally referred to as the “smart classes.” The classes include the students who are seen as academically gifted and belong in the top 20 of the school. Classes D and L
still have a significant number of proficient performing students. The R class has the students with the lowest grades. This hierarchy is partly produced by the policies of the school but all too easily reproduced and reinforced by the students. The Afrikaans students of class H routinely refer to class R as the “stupid class,” the “problem class,” or the “failed class.” Pieter says:

The R group would have the lowest grades. They are the rebels and most of the people who are in the hostel, ... a lot of the rugby players are in there, a lot of the people that cause trouble in school, the students that give the teachers a hard time. The smokers, I think. People that smoke in school. Ja, like those kinds of students ...

The R class thus partly overlaps with the subgroup of the rebels. And the students in the R class are clearly at the bottom of the pile, they not only have the lowest grades but are also seen as a group that causes “trouble” and give the teachers “a hard time.” Consequently, students in the R class are classified by other students as “disruptive,” “dodgy,” and “hardgeat,” or “badass,” and are said to be “rebels,” “troublemakers,” and “rejects” who like to “vuil kuier” (“party dirty”). Some students present this negative picture of the R class without much ado, others with a certain embarrassment. The last group realizes the harsh stereotypes they use to classify the different classes, particularly the R class. The R class has become synonymous for disruption and mayhem, a symbol of everything the good students of the H class do not want to be.

At first sight, lifestyle group distinctions seem based on a combination of racially neutral markers such as lifestyle choices and geographical location. Academic selection does not have to have unequal racial implications. But because they intersect with the racial recruitment policies of the school, they very much do. Because it is the school’s policy to attract students of color primarily based on sporting talent (and to a lesser extent music talent) but not on academic criteria, most of the students are put into the R class. The class that is depicted as “rebels” and causing “trouble” has become also the one with the majority of students of color. All but a few coloured students are grouped together in the R class. However, it also has a number of white students with a low grade-point average. The coloureds are thus grouped together with the white students who are seen as the most deviant from the standards and norms of the school. Some of them have, just like most coloureds, also been attracted to the school with sport bursaries. Most students of the R class, specifically those who play sports, also live in the hostel. As a consequence of these class and living arrangements, the coloureds in grade 11 are thus segregated from the majority of white students in the H, D or L class. And most white students in the H, D, and L classes have hardly any contact with coloured students in the school.

Therefore, the question arises, are these privileged white students aware of the institutional racial arrangements at the school and, if so, to what
extent? Take, for instance, Mariëtta, a student of the H class. In a conversation about whether she had any coloured friends, she starts to notice the unequal racial reality of the school and wrestles openly with the possible implications. Before this conversation, she had presented herself as a very open minded and liberal student. But realizing how few students of color she knows or has in her class, she starts to stutter and blush. She says:

Um….some of my classes... but....not my like...Um…my register class…in the beginning when you take…in my, like, four main subjects, you have the first class, I don’t have any kind of .....But that’s just coincidence, because it is like... Um….the smarter class and it just happens that there isn’t. ...We are the smartest class…Yeah, it’s very crap. ... It’s very weird, I know.

Mariëtta feels embarrassed and uncomfortable about the racial hierarchy in the school and her limited awareness of it. But then she starts to legitimize the current state of affairs. She says that coloureds and whites do not mix because they “just have different interests.” Like other students, Mariëtta feels a need to justify the limited coloured friends she has, and the rare interactions she experiences with coloured students.

Students legitimize the de facto racial segregation at school with a variety of reasons. They say that the class hierarchy is “weird” and “only by accident.” They give justifications for why coloured students are different from themselves. They say that they lack “a common interest” or that you just “can’t have a conversation with them.” Others say that they are “too different” to be friends, as they cannot talk about “academics” and that they like “different sports.” A girl asserts that she is simply “not exposed to them.” She argues that coloured students do not know her, do not talk to her, and, “do not bother her.” Another girl remarks that the lack of interaction is self-imposed by the coloured group: “They stick to their own group. It is almost a little like apartheid.” Ronel says:

They are not close friends of mine, like, I personally don’t have any problem with coloureds, not at all. But I just, I don’t know, they are just not playing hockey, or any of my sports. ... I think it is going back to just being around people where you can be yourself, and you can just associate with. So, it is just what you like to do ... Ja … I think they like hanging out with each other, because then there is no way of racism involved. But I do not think anybody in our school has a big problem with it.

Ronel legitimizes why she does not have any coloured friends. She feels compelled to emphasize that she does not have a problem with coloured students, even though she has no friends of color. She legitimizes this situation by saying that friendships are based on what each student “likes to do” and that there is “no racism involved.”

What binds their arguments together is not so much logical consistency, because there hardly seems to be any. The reasons they give rarely add up to a cohesive argument. This does not mean that what they say is or cannot be
true. But the variation and inconsistency in argumentation does suggest that such justifications are ad-hoc produced. What motivates them is not a cultural ideology, but rather a feeling. Because students feel guilty about the current state of affairs, they provide justifications on the spot. Indeed, although white Afrikaans students have assigned themselves an image of a generation that cherishes diversity—that is beyond race—they have done so without actually making contact across the racial divide. And students feel guilty about it. It is a guilt that arises from being privileged at school, and from wanting to be open minded and liberal.

12.4 RACE TALK

As in most of the public sphere in South Africa, anti-racism has become the social norm at Hoërskool De La Rey. This has changed the nature of race talk. Open abuse of people of color, derogatory remarks, or expressions of white racism—often abundant before 1994—has all but disappeared. In school, this has also produced a new discourse of anti-racism. Many students, particularly the girls, say they actively police the new social norm, both at home and at school. Racial stereotypes are also policed or given new, positive meaning. The absence of open racism almost obscures the fact that race is not only present in students’ talk, but also in their being, seeing, and feeling. Where racism in talk seems easy to police, it is difficult for the students to escape a white worldview that “colors” their view of the world.

POLICING RACIST TALK

All white students argue that there is no racism in the school. Some argue explicitly that coloured students are the same as Afrikaans-speaking white persons. But most girls go even one step further: they adamantly and strongly condemn racism. That is, racism as they define it: open, derogatory remarks at people of color. Ronel talks about what happens if one of the boys says something inappropriate. She says:

One of the boys would say like “Ja, I don’t want that piece here.” Or whatever, just something inappropriate, and then all the girls would just be like “What are you talking about?” And the guys would just keep quiet. Ja, that is usually what would happen. ... He would refer to a worker, which is very racist and I don’t approve...But I think that if we all help the guys that are racist ... If we talked to them, and show them, they might change their minds.

Ronel attributes racist remarks to boys but notes that the girls, particularly in a group, actively and successfully police them. She said that the boys actually do listen and hopes that in the end, such policing would change their minds and help them improve. The girls present themselves as a generation that is “friends” with coloureds. They “do not see” color and they “welcome”
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coloureds as school. The students see themselves not as racist, but rather as active antiracist.

Finding Words
Talking about race does not come easily to white Afrikaans students, in part precisely because of the changed social norms and the new self-representations of being a generation that is beyond race.15 Answers to questions on race are qualified by sentences like “I do not want to be rude” or “I don’t want to look arrogant.” Students are visibly uncomfortable talking about race, and often exhibit a sense of uncertainty about their thoughts as they verbalize their thinking. There is an astute awareness that talking about race and difference can make them be perceived as offensive and racist. Many qualify any remark they make about race and assure that they are “not a racist.” The problem has become: How to explain difference without making distinctions?

What the norm of anti-racism has provided is the necessary impulse for the students to rethink old prejudices. Students have found several creative ways to restate the old prejudices about coloureds. One obvious way is to deny them—to simply stress that there are no differences. For instance, some students say that whites and coloureds academically perform the same, even thought that seems hardly true at De La Rey. Sometimes prejudices are not denied but simply questioned while iterated. Maretha for example says that she wrestles with stereotypes: “Some people say white people plan better for the future … I do not know what to think of it. White people are maybe more sophisticated.” Another way is to say that there are differences, but that they do not matter. For example, some students note that coloured students listen to different music. And although not entirely an innocent distinction, it does not have to be prejudiced.

But those are merely the most obvious ways to deal with prejudices and difference—to deny them, question them, or say they do not matter. There is a more surprising way too. Students rethink old prejudices by inverting them or revaluing them. Traditionally, coloured students were considered noisy—a prejudice that still lingers in the descriptions of the R class. But this can be inverted too. Some students stress that they do not see coloureds’ loud character as a bad thing but as a good thing. They say they love that coloureds are “outgoing,” “start the party,” and “do crazy stuff.” Such distinctions draw a fine line. Often students navigate their comments between admiration and amusement, mixing prejudices with appreciation for difference. In other words: do they laugh at them, or with them? It is sometimes hard to tell.16
**Acting White**

Difference at De La Rey is also experienced by performance, both inside and outside the school. This is evident in how judgments on coloureds are mostly based on behavior that deviates from the white norm. Students describe coloureds as “eccentric” and “exciting.” Such ambivalent characterizations show the fine line between fascination and depreciation. Others are less ambiguous. They refer to coloureds as acting “crazy” or “mental” and “willing to do anything.” Girls also feel intimidated by coloured boys. Zola, for instance, finds it sometimes hard simply to pass a group of coloured boys as they would “squeeze you and everything.” Such characterizations are negative judgments based on a norm of what is appropriate and correct behavior in school. This suggests that racial differences by white students are judged on the basis of performance and how a person is supposed to act.¹⁷

Some coloureds are seen by white students as displaying different behavior—mostly deviant behavior. Acting like a white person is the norm.

**Talking White**

There is not only a way of acting white; there is also a way of talking white. This becomes evident if we compare students in the H and D classes with white people in the R class. Dawid, who sits in class R, is the only boy who says he regularly hangs out with coloured boys.¹⁸ Actually, he is part of the only racially mixed group of male friends at school. He says that he switches his language when he speaks just among whites or in a mixed-race group. He says:

> You have to speak different because when you are with your white friends and you say: “Ja die coloured ou bet my so gesèb ...” (“Yes, that coloured guy just told me …”) If there is a coloured around it sounds to me offensive to say “Ja that coloured ou did that …” I would say: that “ou” (guy) when he would be with me. ... You get used to it when they are there and when they aren’t. You look for them, basically, in a way. You think before you speak. It comes naturally. ... If they would hear it they will smack you! ... It is like a bond that you have that you can sense. You can sense it … you can feel when they are watching …

Dawid watches what he says around coloured people. But he has developed a strategy in which he automatically changes his way of talking from “white talk” to what he deems as more sensitive “mixed-race talk.” Interestingly, he says that knowing this—when to switch and what to change—creates a bond among his white friends. A “sixth sense” that tells them when “they” watch and how to speak in those moments; how to sound acceptable for coloureds and when to let go among your white friends. Thus, you have race talk but you also have white talk. Dawid is exceptional in articulating the existence of white talk. But note how he depicts his switching back and forth as the
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racially sensitive thing to do; he does not seem aware that he can stop his white talk too.

**Feeling White**

Being white is not only a way of acting or talking, but also a way of feeling. Partly because of crime, students rarely venture into an area where the majority is not white or where they have to navigate a multicultural society on more equal footing. While living in “cosmopolitan” Cape Town, white students live predominantly in a white world.\(^{19}\) When they do recount experiences beyond their white world, their white feelings quickly show. There are two ways in which students “feel” being white. The first way is the experience of feeling observed and watched because of being white. The feelings of being watched are invoked by the racialized landscape of their daily lives. School and daily life is comprised of unequal interactions with coloureds in service jobs like security guards, parking attendants, and traffic controllers.\(^{20}\) Most interactions with people of color are highly unequal, and students hardly meet people of color with a similar lifestyle or education.\(^{21}\) Students often say “black” workers make them feel uneasy. Most of them are men, and girls will say they feel sexually intimidated or scared. This, they not only infer from the looks they receive but also from whistling and getting shouted at on school grounds.

The second way is experienced when students venture beyond the immediate setting of the school and their white neighborhoods, and realize that they are a very small white minority in South Africa, even in Cape Town. For instance, many have recently had to go to the Department of Home Affairs to obtain documentation. Students have to personally collect their passport documents and they join a long cue with their fellow non-white South Africans. The students experience the visit as very unpleasant. They recall, unexpectedly, feeling white: “Where has everybody gone?” a student recalled thinking. Students felt fearful, embarrassed and irritated. They say they were treated “unfairly” and felt “dismissed” by black people working at the department. In such a moment, students say they feel “out of place” and that they “do not belong.” Many say that these experiences are nevertheless rare, a statement which only reinforces the impression that they exist mainly in a white world.

When students recall feeling their whiteness, it turns out to be an unpleasant experience. But it is also through these experiences that many girls recognize guilt for being privileged and white in post-apartheid South Africa. They acknowledge this affects their interactions with fellow black South Africans. Girls feel they are labeled as being wealthy, sexually desirable, and privileged. It is striking how in their narratives they mix their own feelings with a reading of the feelings of the racial other. Sandra says:
With the builders here at school, they do not have proper education. I feel they resent me, because I have enough money for school; that I can go to school. They think I am better than them (when I sit) with my backpack, reading before I go to music class. ... You think they look down on you. When they look at you ... you know ... just ... when they stop and stare. They do that (because in that moment) they know they have some little effect on you.

Privilege comes with a burden for Sandra. Sandra thinks that the black people in her surroundings think negatively of her, that they might resent her for her good education and her possibilities. By staring at her she feels they want to get back at her. She feels guilt, but she tries to diminish this feeling by negotiating her privileged position. She says:

It is not racist. It has nothing to do with me or with them. I (only) play some part in it. If I am clever or if I deserve it, I can’t, claim it, it is not my doing. Some people in my class throw away their potential; they can do so much.

Sandra argues her chances in life have nothing to do with race; she cannot be held responsible for her privileged position. The only thing she can do, like others students have, is to fail her potential. She says:

Some black people laugh at that, that white people can fail and disgrace themselves. That is ironic—wouldn’t they be angry that something is thrown away that they could have used so much better? You are just using your potential, and have everything going for you. That cannot be bad. But they are just angry.

Sandra feels in an impossible position. She argues that to not use her potential would be a waste of resources, and for blacks to enjoy such a thing is wrong. But if she does use her potential, she feels blacks are resentful of her. As a consequence, interactions with the racial other are tense and anxious. She says:

You are afraid to offend them. You don’t know what to say. By saying something plain like what I want to do, they might be resentful about that, so you are careful about what you say. I’d rather not say anything than lie, if it makes them feel bad. I feel bad, and guilty, for everything. I do.

Sandra feels constantly emotionally strained. She argues that it is always better to use her opportunities than to fail. And yet she still feels guilty about her privileges and wants to get rid of the feeling. She feels damned if she does, and damned if she doesn’t use her chances.

But note how this logic in relation to her privileged position rests on the lack of recognition of the historical advantages that benefited her white group. Guilty about being privileged, but failing to see the historical roots of their privilege, she constantly has to manage the troubled feelings that come
with the unequal race relations. Sandra is exceptional in articulating these feelings, but her sentiment is hardly rare. As much as these girls want to be beyond racism, their experience and feelings are distinctly white. To be young, white and privileged in post-apartheid South Africa is a constant source of ambivalence and unease. And being Afrikaans only complicates their feelings.

12.5 CULTURE TALK

The history of apartheid still hangs as a dark cloud over the students’ heads. Precisely because of their white privilege, talking about apartheid signals trouble and unease for these students. “It keeps popping up everywhere,” Sandra says with some surprise about apartheid. Being Afrikaans is always connected to the past. Actually, there is little evidence of the old nationalist framework in the cultural talk of students, but there is a stigma connected to being Afrikaans. Culture talk is predominantly about a culture they struggle to grow out of. The students do not want to be associated with the history of apartheid and yet they feel they are connected with it again and again. As a consequence, we see a paradox: while their historical knowledge of apartheid often does not go beyond a few clichéd images, they cannot distance themselves from a past that shapes their current place in the world.

Apartheid casts a large shadow because government programs that try to correct the wrongs of the past, like affirmative action, have real consequences in the lives of white students, certainly psychologically. It is precisely because of the implications of these programs that students want to disown their own collective cultural past. Their cultural talk resolves around two arguments. First, they are highly invested in the “new” South African speak of self-determining your identity. There is a new generation of Afrikaners, they say. However, and this is their second argument, they also present themselves as the new victims in post-apartheid South Africa. Students invest tremendous energy in both arguments in order to fight the stigma apartheid left and lift the wages of guilt. Ultimately, however, this is also how they defend their privilege.

THE BURDEN OF THE PAST

The question of what it means to be an Afrikaner today is one thread in students’ culture talk. Students are frustrated that white Afrikaans-speaking people are still connected with apartheid. Discussing the past makes the students self-conscious and they cannot discuss apartheid without talking about identity. Apartheid poses a challenge to incorporate in answering questions about who they are, and where they come from. But if students equate their Afrikaner cultural identity with apartheid, how do they understand apartheid? Students, at best, show a meager grasp of historical reality. Zola says:
I don’t know much. But I know that um … um … the coloured people lived in District Six and then the white people came and then … and then the coloured people had to go away and then the white people took over like everywhere almost … and then it was like coloured area and a black area and … so every race … it was a different group area. And mostly it was everywhere white and um….white people had different entrances like the front and coloured people had entrance at the back; they had different bunks outside and beaches and … actually that’s all I know.

Like most students from Cape Town, Zola knows about the forceful removal of coloureds from District Six and the signs for white and black people at the beaches. Most students remember the powerful images of forced removal and spatial segregation. Those images have stuck. However, the unequal socio-economic structures of apartheid are forgotten. The images and impressions are also hardly—if at all—connected to an understanding of the historical structural oppression or culture of racism. Why students are only able to produce a few clichéd stories remains a question. Maybe it is because only four white Afrikaans students have chosen history in grade 11th in comparison to 16 coloured students. Maybe if apartheid is simplified to forced removal and segregated beaches, the historical injustices seem easier to rectify—and indeed have been rectified. Policies like affirmative action to redress the past would no longer be necessary and not affect the students negatively.

Nevertheless, the lack of knowledge about the past has little bearing on the consensus among the boys and girls that apartheid was a bad thing. Pieter says:

I think it was wrong to treat those people differently. I don’t think I would have agreed. If I had lived in those times, I don’t think I would have agreed with the ways of the white people. But … if you were brought up to believe that all black people are evil, from the day you were born, or that they are different from us, you would believe that, because your parents taught that to you. And … Yeah, I do feel bad, for them, for coloured people. Definitely, they didn’t deserve it. They didn’t even do anything. I mean, God created us all as equals.

Pieter finds it hard to imagine that he would have agreed to apartheid if he had lived then. Like most students, he feels bad it happened. But he qualifies the crimes of apartheid by suggesting that racism is socialized, and that people like his parents were educated to be racists. He soft-peddles questions of responsibility. Most students say that apartheid was bad. They say they feel guilty about it. It seems that the new social norm of antiracism prescribes such an answer. You can’t subscribe to the norms of antiracism without saying that the racist thinking of the past was wrong.

But this does not mean students are not ambivalent about why or how apartheid happened, and who is responsible for it. Indeed, when it comes to
the question of responsibility for apartheid, the students’ first response is
denial. They hold the older generation responsible for it. Students argue that
their generation has “nothing to do” with apartheid. They “don’t want to be
compared to it” and are “glad they live after apartheid.” An undefined “they”
is often held responsible for apartheid, a group of people that is said to have
been “flippin’ stupid.” It is as if the students don’t want to recognize the
consequences of the past for the society they live in.

Distancing themselves from the past is hard work, and in many ways a
challenge that is impossible to win. In daily life they are continuously
reminded of the apartheid past: on television, in the newspapers, and
sometimes also in person. A few students mention direct accusations they
have faced, from coloured classmates for instance, although this happened
more in the R class than in the “white” classes. Nevertheless, for most
students at De La Rey experiences with direct accusations are the exception.
The students feel they are held responsible in the media, as Afrikaners, and
they feel bad about it. Pierre says:

I think uh, sometimes you feel, well, bad about stuff ... Because of our
background and whatever, but ... it is something that is hard, because you
keep hearing about it, you keep hearing about apartheid in the news, or
people mentioning it a lot, or people blaming stuff on the past. Despite that
it has been 14 years since apartheid has ended. And people still blame
Afrikaners for things that happen today, because of what happened in the
past. Then you feel quite bad about it.

Most students, like Pierre, say they feel bad because they are implicated by the
past. They feel guilt by association and they feel frustrated about it. They
struggle to lift the stigma, and it is this that seems to be the driving force for
students to passionately argue their generation, as Afrikaners, has changed in
significant ways.

A NEW GENERATION
One strategy to signal change is to say that they are a new generation of
Afrikaners. Students invest a lot of energy to signal that they are “beyond
apartheid” and have shed the “bad habits” of the past. To distinguish
themselves, they create a distance with their parents—the old generation is
still “stuck in apartheid” and did not “learn their lessons.” Students say they
fight with their parents and that they know the history better than them.

Some girls argue that Afrikaner culture is actually in need of a change, and
that change is needed from the inside. Sandra says: “We are changing right
now, but it doesn’t mean we are losing it. I think we needed a change.
Especially from the apartheid, so I would not want that to stay the same.”
Sandra argues that she and other young Afrikaners are changing, but without
losing their Afrikaner identity. The problem is that although she is keenly
aware of the illegitimacy of her culture, given its apartheid past, what is to
change remains elusive. The solution for the girls is to simply say they have changed. That is the change.

A second strategy by the female students to symbolize they have changed is to problematize Afrikaner as an identity label. Students say they have become uneasy with the label “Afrikaner” used as a singular category. They do not want to defend Afrikaners as a single group with a common history and collective identity. There are many different Afrikaners, they say. Or are there really only two? The second strategy often comes down to a strong boundary between themselves and the old stereotype. Students draw a line between the apartheid Afrikaner and the post-apartheid Afrikaner. The first type lives on the platteland (countryside) or in Gauteng (the North), likes rugby, is patriotic, listens to traditional Afrikaans songs, and sometimes still “boosts the Afrikaans ideal of apartheid.” He “does simple things and is a racist.” Students feel openly embarrassed for him. The post-apartheid Afrikaner, by contrast, lives in the city, speaks Afrikaans and English, and is individualistic and internationally oriented. He likes music from overseas, embraces people of different color, and does not discriminate.  

The female students present themselves as the new generation of Afrikaners who embrace the new South Africa and love their country. As Annelie says, “The fact that we have 11 different languages, and we have a lot of cultures and things, I love this country.” However, this does not mean they would not like to live somewhere else. Most express their love for their country together with a wish to explore the world beyond their country. Although sometimes there is the suggestion of flight, this is hardly the majority of cases. Mostly it is a wish to explore the larger world for a limited amount of time. Sandra says:

Yes, I am happy in South Africa. I would definitely like to go overseas after school. I would like to go for, say, a year or two. I am happy, but it broadens your horizons, your perspective, and your—how can you say—you know what this part of the world is like. It’s not the same as the rest of Africa, or a lot of Asia, but it is closer to that than the very protected environment of Europe. So, I’m happy that I am exposed to something less than perfect. Yes. It’s also very beautiful here, but you have more perspective when you know what it is like in some parts of Africa.

Sandra does not want to leave South Africa because she feels she doesn’t belong. Rather, she sees the time after high school as years to explore the world, a gap year. In her explanation, she puts a positive spin on living in South Africa; a place that is not quite Africa, not quite Europe, but a place that sensitizes you to the rough reality of the African continent. In a strange way, she takes pride in the rougher edges of South Africa.
WE ARE THE VICTIMS

Resentment and anger about the implications of affirmative action programs has created a second thread in the students’ culture talk that connects talk of the apartheid past, with talk of the present, and influences the students’ outlook on the future. Students talk about the consequences of apartheid, the unfairness of affirmative action and the dark picture they imagine of their future in South Africa in a single breath. Indeed, as much as the students say they feel guilty about the past, and want to be thought of as a new generation, they also say they are unfairly affected by the affirmative action programs. They feel they are the new victims in post-apartheid South Africa. Painting themselves as victims gives students a powerful argument not to feel guilty anymore, because now opportunities and chances have reversed, and they are the victims of new policies. The victim argument helps them to cope with feelings of guilt.

The students argue that current affirmative action programs are unfair by holding them responsible for apartheid, a crime they feel they are not primarily responsible for. They feel new affirmative action programs are “unfair” to single them out. Further, they believe the programs may seriously affect their future possibilities, both in terms of educational opportunities, sports and jobs. In the most extreme form, students argue that apartheid has not stopped but instead has been “reversed.” After apartheid, the students say, it is the whites who are at the “bottom of the food chain.” Mariëtta, who mostly holds strong liberal views and supports antiracism, nevertheless opposes affirmative action with this discourse. She says:

It’s basically for the mistakes our forefathers made that we have to pay. Therefore they’re trying to bring the black people … up to our level by giving them a better chance for … the university or work or anything … That’s actually quite unfair, because lots of my friends who want to do medical … if you have like 90% and there’s a black person who has 60%, they’d rather chose that person just because they need to bring the numbers up, and that’s like taking away talent as well … and they’re doing that at work places which also they … easily make them manager and demote the other people, the white people, and that’s like completely ruining most of our companies for … people who didn’t have the talent for it … And most white people are, like, leaving South Africa to go work somewhere else because they know they’re not going to get work, which is kind of like a “brain drain” for our country.

Objections to affirmative action, like those of Mariëtta, display a logic that naturalizes their position of privilege. Mariëtta does not make any connection between apartheid, her position of privilege, and affirmative action. She does not take any responsibility for the past. In fact, affirmative action is presented as an assimilationist program to bring non-whites “up to the level” of whites, and not a program to correct past wrongs, which it is. She is concerned with the potential waste of talent of her white peers, but does not make any
reference to the years of wasted talent of the black population. She feels it is unfair to lower standards for black people to “bring up the numbers”—a reference to the quota system that is now applied in various employment sectors like government and parastatals like the energy company Eskom. Note Mariëtta’s final suggestion that new black employees would not have the right skills for the job they get, a common prejudice among students.

Students argue the programs should exempt the youth. Central to arguments that oppose affirmative action is their understanding that their generation is not responsible for apartheid. The victim talk provides a rich variety of arguments to do so. Students argue that they should not “pay” for the faults of apartheid. Students argue that it is “not fair” because they didn’t do “anything bad.” The language of fairness is particularly striking. Holding them responsible for apartheid is “not fair” because they feel they “weren’t even part of it” and “never experienced it.” They “were only 4 years of age” at the time. They say they had “nothing to do with it” and some even suggest that “their parents weren’t even part of it.”

Apparentl, it is one thing for students to say they feel the past was wrong; it is another thing to support policies to redress past wrongs. Sometimes, the strategy to present themselves as victims and to argue for more “fairness” directly contradicts claims and impulses of the students that they are a new generation of Afrikaners that takes its responsibility. For instance, see how the girl Maretha mixes the language of fairness in her protest of affirmative action with admitting responsibility of the past. She says:

White women are last on the list if you want a job. We feel sometimes it is unfair. But on the other hand, it was not their fault either, so mainly it is good. But no, I do not think it is fair … but it also was fair, because it was not good to deprive them from it. ... We have to give them opportunities.

Maretha must overcome two contradictory impulses. She says that it is good to help people who have been disadvantaged in the past. She seems to feel so as well. But at the same time she seems to feel it is unfair that her generation, those who grew up after apartheid, are disadvantaged by such programs, and therefore punished for apartheid. It is at these moments, where privilege, and students’ defense of it, conflicts with their feelings (and talk) of guilt and wanting to be a new generation.

In the most extreme version of the victim argument, students argue that apartheid has slowly reversed, that things have turned around and that now whites are being discriminated against. Students argue that in the new South Africa, blacks and coloureds are “better off” and have “more rights” than them. Some students soft-pedal this radical line by saying that the situation is “moving in this direction” and that things are “taken too far.” Ronel says:

There will always be problems, but now apartheid is over. For a time it went really well but now it is like reverse apartheid. OK, instead of discriminating
against blacks, there is discrimination against whites. More and more so, it probably is better than what it was, but it is still not ideal.

The use of reverse apartheid by Ronel is one indication of how concepts of the past do take on a new life of their own; how “reverse apartheid” has become the new shorthand among whites for discrimination and unfair treatment.

**Anxieties about the Future**

As students feel victimized and threatened by affirmative action, it comes as no surprise that this bears down on their outlook for the future. Girls fear what is to come and in their anxiety for the future, they are receptive to dystopian rumors about the reversal of their fortunes. Zola says:

I don’t know, I don’t actually want to think about the future because I’ve heard that it’s gonna … yeah, the coloured people are gonna take over and … they want the white people to, like, go away, so I’m scared for that. … Mostly, it would just be coloured people everywhere and the white people would work for the coloured people instead of how it was like a few years back when the coloured people worked for the white people, and the coloured people are gonna drive the fancy cars and the white people’s gonna walk to the shops and things like that. … And then … yeah, that’s how we think it’s gonna be. Hopefully I won’t be here. I would be like in America or somewhere else, I think, hopefully.

Where Zola hears the stories of coloured people that “rule” South Africa is unclear from her story, but it seems these are issues she discusses with friends. Such dystopian images show how opposition to affirmative action is fed by existential fears of the future. It is also in the context of affirmative action that the talk of traveling abroad and living elsewhere takes on a much darker meaning. Students then fear a similar situation to Zimbabwe.

However, it doesn’t mean that these girls do not express any hope for the future. For many the anxious fantasies exists side-by-side to dreams of traveling the world and love of South Africa. In fact, the girls often try to give their sense of the future a positive spin, after expressing their anxieties. Annelie says:

I think the future is pretty bright. We have vision. I think we can keep on going. We’re a nation that would probably stand together. We have been through a lot. I mean, our parents and stuff have been through a lot. Having to go through apartheid and having to go through all of the things that have happened in our past, … But the youth doesn’t really … or didn’t really live in that time, so we build toward the future in a different way. We are all together, the different cultures are together. We could make it brighter if we stop complaining about all the bad things and start about the positive things. People complain and they don’t really look for the answers to the questions.
They just complain. I think sometimes the youth will see things differently and they … they’ll work toward the positive things more than the negative.

Note how Annelie strings together the tropes of the discourse about being a new generation. She argues that her generation has a “vision” and has “overcome” apartheid. They have “changed” and are “together.” They can decide to stop complaining. She shows how the discourse of being a new generation is ultimately a strategy of emotion management—a strategy to manage a future that is scary and uncertain, but best approached with a positive discourse that signals change and a common destiny.

12.6 CONCLUSION

De La Rey student Sandra presents herself as the new cosmopolitan citizen of post-apartheid South Africa—an Afrikaans-speaking girl no longer interested in her roots but with a strong belief in multicultural South Africa. However, she remains preoccupied by a nagging sense of racial guilt about her white privilege. She feels the need to defend her privileges against the less well-to-do, particularly blacks. Sandra’s preoccupations symbolize most female students at De La Rey, a group whose narrative about identity and race is marked by a tension between a belief in diversity and their whiteness that legitimizes racial inequality. This tension is heightened by the institutional culture of the school, and the selective desegregation that the school has experienced in the last decade.

De La Rey is a white, single-medium, Afrikaans, high school in Cape Town—a top school in the Western Cape. The school presents itself as a top-rate Afrikaans school, with an emphasis on academics, culture, and sports. The management defines the school’s character, and its elite character, by its traditional, Afrikaans-Christian character. Although the school desegregated after 1994, the number of non-white students is still below 20 percent. Nevertheless, Afrikaans students describe the school as a diverse and multicultural community that is open to everybody in South Africa. This image even gives them a feeling of belonging—no matter how different it is from the school’s management. Students argue that race is no longer an issue and that the school’s community is open-minded and liberal. They connect this view to the positive image they have of Cape Town and South Africa.

This discourse of diversity sits uneasily with the students’ segregated lifestyle, in and outside school. In school, the racial order is shaped by the hierarchical organization of classes. Because coloured students are predominantly admitted on the basis of athletic, not academic, merit, the majority of non-white students are allocated to the classes with the least academic potential. The majority of Afrikaans students have little to no contact with their fellow coloured students, in or outside of class. This is also evident from the students’ lifestyle labels, used to categorize groups in school.
Afrikaans youth is dominant and so is the white experience. The girls live in a white world, most of the time, also outside of school.

When it comes to race, the girls implicitly use themselves—their privileged whiteness—as the norm, in and outside of school. Their belief in diversity does not stop them from struggling with talking about race, applying racial prejudices, and experiencing racial discomfort. They have to make a conscious effort to articulate thoughts about race. Their race talk is often factually inaccurate and, overall, they know very little about coloured or black South Africans. Racial stereotypes and old racist ways of thinking are still rampant, particularly when they reflect on non-whites outside of school. The discourse of diversity is not sustained by intimate interracial experiences in daily life. Rather, the opposite seems true: the diversity discourse builds on a set of positive self-images and racial fantasies that can only exist because of their white world—a world in which the girls’ white identities and racial views are never challenged.

Students present themselves as a new generation of Afrikaners; a young generation that said goodbye to apartheid and is no longer racist. However, they struggle to re-label their generation. They qualify the label “Afrikaner” but offer no alternatives, an indication how difficult it is—even for these privileged students—to escape their ethnic stigma. They say they are still *trots*, or proud Afrikaans. They participate in Afrikaans cultural festivals and enjoy being among Afrikaners. Being a new generation does not mean they accept responsibility for apartheid or endorse affirmative action. Without exception, students decry that they should be held responsible for the consequences of apartheid. Instead, they feel disadvantaged by affirmative action programs. They see this program as unfair. Some even speak of “reverse apartheid” and present themselves as the new “victims.” For a new and young generation, the girls are remarkably anxious about their privileged position. They say they want to be positive about the future, but they all contemplate the possibility of leaving—even if only temporary.

De La Rey allows for a space in which a post-racial discourse can manifest itself among the young Afrikaners—individually of the staff. However, there is a gap between the new cultural discourse and racial reality. At the school, there is only minimal desegregation, at best in name and imagery. At worst, desegregation has not changed the racial order of the school—a fact that is not acknowledged by the staff or the students. The students’ daily experiences, racialized outlook on life, and defense of white privileges sit uneasily with their post-racial self-image. What results is a nagging sense of guilt about their privileged position, an emotion sustained by the discrepancy between the reality they live, and their ambition to be the first Afrikaner generation that is beyond race.
13. Loss and Shame

13.1 THE STORY OF ALEX

“I don’t know why they do the wrong things,” Alex says. “But I am not a racist. I don’t go around calling people racial names.” Alex is an outspoken young, Afrikaans boy who sits in the 11th grade at the formerly Afrikaans school, Hoërskool Die Groot Trek. A few weeks ago, Alex got mugged by a black person, and he struggles how to make sense of the experience: why would a black guy attack him over his bike? Crime and racial incidents like the one that happened to Alex are no exception for him. Contrary to most whites in Cape Town, Alex does not live in one of the privileged, all-white neighborhoods. His parents belong to the lower middle class and he lives in the borderlands of white Cape Town, one of the few truly racially mixed areas in the city, where the wealthy, white Southern neighborhoods touch upon the Cape flats. Alex lives in an area where white privilege is no longer a given for young Afrikaners, and old apartheid institutions, like Hoërskool Die Groot Trek, no longer provide a stable surrounding for identity development—they struggle themselves to adjust to the new reality.

Hoërskool Die Groot Trek changed rapidly after apartheid. The location of the school and its affordability contributed to rapid desegregation after apartheid. However, since Alex began attending Groot Trek, the school has again resegregated. Many whites perceive the school as too unsafe, even though it is located in a “good” area and only borders neighborhoods where crime is very high. Alex is one of the few white Afrikaans boys left at school. The teachers are still mostly white and Afrikaners, and struggle themselves to adjust to a very different student population. As a young Afrikaner man, Alex
finds himself relying mostly on his peers to come to terms with the painful transition. They all struggle to connect to the new post-apartheid order.

All Afrikaans students notice that the school has changed. But for Afrikaner boys like Alex, Groot Trek has become a symbol for what they feel has been lost: morality, discipline, and ethnic pride. “Sometimes,” he confesses, after the violent incident, “when I see a black guy on a bike, I feel like a racist, and that I am a ‘true Boer.’” A true Boer, to him, is an Afrikaner of the past; an Afrikaner from apartheid. Alex doesn’t want to be thought of as a racist, and he had many coloured and black friends when he was younger. Nevertheless, his racial boundaries seemed to have hardened, while the Afrikaner past, with its stories of Afrikaners’ military might, has gained appeal. At school, he carries the label of “Boer” with a certain pride. He says he “likes” his culture and where he comes from. He enjoys Afrikaans music and hangs out with Afrikaans people. “I am Afrikaans,” he says. “There is not much I can do about it.” Alex can’t claim the old white Afrikaner privileges of the past but he can claim its solid sense of male identity.

13.2 DESEGREGATION AND RESEGREGATION

An idyllic painting in the staff room portrays Hoërskool Die Groot Trek as Afrikaners once must have imagined it: no railroad tracks and a lush green landscape that contrasts with the bright, red roof of the school. The school children are not in the painting, as if the painter did not want to risk bringing disorder to the harmonious image. Not one of the surrounding industrial buildings is on the picture, making the school dramatically stand out against the backdrop of Table Mountain, as an isolated ideal.

Die Groot Trek is located at a remarkable location: exactly at the border between the white, coloured, and black areas of Cape Town, which is one of the most segregated cities in South Africa (Seekings, 2005). North of the school is the leafy green, affluent white suburbs, built in the shadow of Table Mountain. Nowadays these neighborhoods are marked by large walls with barbed-wired and ominous signs of guard dogs and armed response teams. South of the school, across the railroad tracks, is Mitchells Plain, the coloured residential area. It was there where coloureds were relocated after District Six (their neighborhood near downtown) was infamously razed in the 1970s to make way for white businesses. A mix of lower-middle-class whites, coloureds, and some black families now surround the school. These neighborhoods were once all white during apartheid. Most of the white Afrikaans kids at Groot Trek come from these neighborhoods.

During apartheid, Die Groot Trek was famous for its rugby team and the good sports facilities. Near the entrance of the school, a brown, old cupboard with glass doors still functions as their rugby hall of fame. Inside is the Pieteret of an athlete from the class of 1999, which was the school’s last provincial victory. Ten years before, the school still delivered the top
academic student of the Western Cape. Groot Trek was special because over half of the white Afrikaner students came from the nearby military base. The school’s drill platoon was famous, and it won many prices in the provincial competition. Every Friday the school would hold drill exercises for the *seuns* and the *meisjies*. A military officer from the base would come to oversee the exercises. Although the school was probably exceptional in its military ties, this was common practice in all Afrikaner secondary schools. Drill exercises at the school were only abolished in 1993.¹

Today, the school grounds still suggest the affluence of a bygone era. The school has large school premises that include tennis courts, netball courts, a cricket area, two rugby fields, and a swimming pool. But the water in the pool has turned brown, and the nets of the tennis courts are missing.

**Loss and Change**

A few years ago, the school still could have been qualified as a mixed-race school. After 1994, when the school officially desegregated, the intake was initially small. For a few years after that, the school had roughly equal student populations of coloureds and whites, and some blacks.² The school management did not sit idle in the face of a falling influx of white students. At first, it offered a few scholarships to white students. It also started to develop ties with schools in coloured areas, to assure the cream of the crop of the coloured students. In 2001, the school changed its language policy to dual-medium (classes offered both in Afrikaans and English) because the school hoped to attract better black students. But all these policies did not help to retain the school’s white Afrikaans students.

Die Groot Trek is now one year away from becoming an all coloured and black school. It is still a mixed-race school but without white students. The process of change has not been gradual, but has been a sudden and complete withdrawal of all but a few white students. For four years the school has not attracted any white students. The school passed a threshold where the intake of coloured and black students rises above 30 percent and then quickly transitions from mostly white to only coloured and black. This process in the United States is often referred to as the “tipping point.” The school is still actively recruiting the best students from lower-middle class coloured suburbs. Nevertheless, there are only a few Afrikaner kids left in grades 11 and 12. The lower grades are completely coloured and black, with the number of black students rapidly increasing.³

The sudden withdrawal of white students has left the staff and the teachers in shock. “It was adapt or die,” Miss Vlek, a teacher of Afrikaans says. While the student composition has rapidly changed at Groot Trek, the teacher corps, consisting of 17 teachers, has not.⁴ Many teachers have been teaching at the school for over two decades. Most are still Afrikaans, as there
are only three coloured teachers at the school, of which one only lasted a year and another one has a temporary contract.

Talking about the changes in the school, the teachers do not so much talk about the racial changes as about the fact that teaching has “completely changed.” They describe the morale at school as low. When talking about change, most teachers refer to the bureaucracy of the new outcomes-based teaching methods, and the content changes of the various courses. They also refer to economic reasons. The school suffers from shrinking resources because government regulations allow for only about half of the students to actually pay school fees. As one consequence, the school’s music rooms have been closed for years, as there is no money to attract a music teacher. But the challenges of the school clearly go beyond financial woes, and there has been much more lost than school income. But what is truly lost is hard to see from only studying school practices. Because as much as the racial composition of students has changed, many of the practices at school have stayed exactly the same. Most resistant to change has been the school ethos: the many traditions and cultural practices of the school. Afrikaans schools always had a strong ethos, a traditional outlook on what education was about and what a school was supposed to do. It consists of traditions both subtle and large, both functional and ceremonial.

The teachers uphold the traditions with a mix of zeal and desperation that betrays their function as a last stronghold. For instance, even though the student population is half English, the headmaster still does his announcements in Afrikaans. Another example is the school meetings. They are held every Tuesday morning in the third period. They traditionally start with a reading from the bible, and students have to stand in strict lines according to their class. But the stories hardly relate anymore to the realities where most children come from. The results of the rugby team are also still read by students, but the statements are never prepared and the school grapples to even have a rugby team. The school anthem is sung for closure, but nobody remembers the words anymore.

Most of the older teachers complain about the “lack of commitment” of students. Students, they say, do not have “school spirit” and are “not interested.” But there are other voices too. A young, white English teacher, who was recently hired for only a year, is critical of the approach taken by the school. He argues that the school is in a “transitional phase.” He says:

Children do not come in uniform to sports events anymore. They do not sing together anymore. Singing in the hall is terrible. The school is trying to do the same thing but not succeeding very well. The teachers are trying to maintain the traditions, because without that, there is not much they can build on.

The young teacher suggests that without traditions there is not much for teachers to build on. The question he asks is a pointed one: What are teachers
to do without following tradition? A temporary coloured teacher points out various other social problems. He says that because the influx of coloured students has been so large, social problems have also skyrocketed, including issues such as school absence, physical abuse, drug and alcohol problems, violence, and crime. And yet the way to deal with these problems at Groot Trek has not changed. Every Friday, the teachers gather together to discuss the various issues the teachers face and “the problems” the students have. So far, the school has failed to see how the problems at hand deserve a more intensive approach then a three-minute group discussion, and there is no funding for a social worker.

Miss Vlek and other teachers are confronted with a majority of students who have a background and culture they are barely familiar with—students who live in neighborhoods with many more social problems than most white students. It appears as if they are so shocked from these changes that they are unable to grasp their full reality. Their state of shock and denial becomes more evident when we consider the official and unofficial reasons the school management and teachers give for the changes at the school—and what is missing from it.

**INTERPRETING CHANGE**

The official reading from the school management, and many of the teachers, is that white students have stopped coming to the school because of changes in the military. It is true that society as a whole, including the South African Defense Forces, has transformed, so the school has increasingly struggled to attract white students. But that only partly explains the complete disappearance of white students from the school. The standard narrative at the school is that, indeed, influx from military kids dropped and the racial composition of the neighborhoods surrounding the schools started to change, with new middle-class coloured and black families moving into the formerly whites-only areas, and white Afrikaans people increasingly moving to the northern suburbs.

Additionally, it is evident that the school has also developed an increasingly negative image. In many informal conversations, the school is marked as a school full of “drugs and violence” although both reasons have little empirical ground. It is a negative image with a strong racial subtext. Today, the head of the primary school who used to send its students to Groot Trek, advises its white student population to go elsewhere. The staff and teachers must know that, which brings us to the elephant in the room. Because as much as the intake of students has changed at Groot Trek, and as much as race has to do with that, the topic of race is never openly discussed.

No teacher will deny the school has changed. Teachers note that students have “different perceptions”; that the “language capabilities” of students have changed; and that “discipline has gone down.” Indeed, the staff and teachers are certainly aware of the new challenges but race is still a silent topic at
school. However, teachers feel that any explanation that can be interpreted as racist needs to be avoided. And thus the huge cultural schism between the teachers and the new students is mostly left unaddressed. This is most evident in the discourse rooted in cultural globalization, or rather, Americanization, about the change and why they confront such different youth than they did 20 years ago. Miss Vlek for example notes that students have changed at school because of “Americanization” and the “zap culture.” Everything that has to do with South Africa is seen as “not cool.” She deplores the new culture at school of “wearing your own clothes” and “to dislike schoolwork.” In American teenage movies, she says, the teachers are always depicted as stupid and the parents often too, that is why students don’t like school. “It is a plastic culture,” she says. Other teachers at Groot Trek feel that the students of today are only interested in cell phones and Internet chat rooms. They say that school for students has no priority and that they do not feel a need to study. There is “less creativity” and no sense of “extending yourself.” The changes at Groot Trek present teachers like Vlek with many challenges; challenges for which their long teaching career has not prepared them. It asks of daily improvisation after 20 years of teaching inertia.

13.3 IDENTITY TALK

How do white, Afrikaans-speaking students at Die Groot Trek see themselves in relation to the school and the school community? Not surprisingly, all white students in the upper classes are acutely aware of the changes happening at their school. In their stories, they also mention many activities and practices in school that have disappeared or lost their essential meaning. Few talk about their lifestyle or their sport activities as the basis of their identity. Instead, the students are united by the feelings of loss. What is striking, however, is how boys and girls respond differently to loss: while the girls are able to name their feelings; to admit how the loss affected them; the boys pretend not to care. Nevertheless, in the boys’ discourse about change, there is much evidence they care more than anybody around them.

UNITED BY LOSS

Most prominent is a discourse of loss at the school. Students will say, similar to teachers, that the discipline is not there anymore and that there is less respect for teachers. They say there is “not really punishment.” They also complain about the teachers who are “never there anymore.” They complain about the noise in the hallway. It is the most important thing that unites teachers and the white students. Students feel the changes have come quickly. Many remember their sisters or brothers going to the same school, but having a very different experience. Take for instance Alex—if he is asked about the changes in the school, he riffs about what is lost since his sister went to this school. He says:
My sister used to be in this school. It was a very good school. It used to have athletics. It used to have netball. Netball was the best team. We had the best rugby team in the Western Cape. We played each school. It is not good anymore. It was a good school seven years ago. It had a lot of discipline. It was very different.

The idea that Groot Trek was a very good school did not only live among teachers, but clearly also among students. The students feel they have lost a wide variety of activities and amenities previously provided by the school. Many activities, like sport, had to stop out of lack of participation or money. Several courses have also been terminated. But more importantly, traditions, practices and rituals that many white students used to take pride in, have now withered or lost their meaning. A good example is academic standards in the school.

Traditionally, academic achievement was given meaning through specific symbols—symbols that in the past meant something to students, and which have now lost their value for them. Marie says that the insignie she wears used to signify you belonged to the top 10 students of the school, but that now it does not mean anything to her anymore. She says:

Previously, the highest academic-achievement award went to someone who got 90%. Now the standard had dropped and all you need is a 70 or a 60 percent average and you will make it into the top 10. It has become easier … I don’t know why, maybe the work has just become easier or maybe I just work harder. I think the academic standards have lowered but I don’t know why. I think the kids are just not motivated anymore. It could be also that the curriculum has changed and it has become easier for us to get higher marks like 70 percent or so. My mum is very disappointed with the drop in standards. She wants the school to go back to the way it was when it was fun and we used to have activities after school and stuff like that. Sometimes I think the quality of education has lowered. It’s not like it used to be.

Marie’s lament about all the changes and the loss it has brought is evident. Other students also note, just like the teachers, daily frustrations with going to a multicultural school. They say the manners of students have changed and the codes of conduct have become unsure. They say that nobody is motivated and that no one sings the school song anymore. It is clear that students feel that standards have dropped, motivation is gone, and that the quality of education has lowered. But behind these particulars, something else has lost too for students.

This comes to the forefront when students talk in more abstract terms about what is lost. They will say that the school “is not what is used to be” or that “sport is dying out” and “there is no more sports in the school.” Some rhetorically ask: “What is a school without sports?” They say similar things about culture. They say that it is good “to have culture” in a school, but that their school “does not have culture anymore.” Factually, such statements are
clearly wrong, as the school still has a rugby team and of course has “a culture.” But they hint at something else.

What they say is that sports activities do not have the same cultural meaning anymore. They have lost their relevance and their value. In their thinking, such activities used to stand for something. They were activities that were valued and that shaped the school culture. So what is lost for students is not simply some traditions, but the ideal of what a school is supposed to be—an ideal in which sports, culture and discipline still matter, and are central to the culture of the school—school where academic and bodily standards are upheld and mean something to the school community.

The students’ loss is thus both concrete and abstract. The students do not feel they belong to an institution they can be proud of. But contrary to the teachers, the students have a limited grasp of why these changes occurred. Almost none of the students know exactly why the school has changed, or, for that matter, how they can explain what has happened to the school.\(^6\) Many of the students have noticed that every year, less white children attend the school, but they do not know why. Some children moved, they know, but others, as one of the girls noted, “Just changed schools.” Students heard rumors from friends in the neighborhood about the school’s bad image, and purported drug use and violence. One student asserts how the headmasters of nearby primary schools prevent white children from coming to the school. But nobody knows for certain.

**DIVIDED IN RESPONSE**

The white Afrikaans students find themselves in a completely different situation than their older brothers and sisters. With the teachers, they share a discourse of loss and they lament practices and traditions that are no longer present. Although the students do not know why the school changed, what they do know, of course, is that the changes happened at the same time as the new students of color entered the school. This is also evident in their discourse of loss. Students mention an unaccounted “they” (implicit or explicit) to attribute cause: “it is loud” becomes “they are loud”; “there is no respect” becomes “they are rude” and “they smoke in the schoolyard”; “there is no safety” becomes “as long as they don’t do anything to me.” Even fears about safety include this ghostly “they.” Some changes are attributed to the new students of color, rarely explicitly.

One reason that this attribution is mostly implicit is the social norm of nonracism. Attributing the change and loss at the school explicitly to the coloured students would be considered racist. And if the white Afrikaans students want to prevent one label, then it is that of racist. Already they feel stigmatized because of the apartheid past. Students therefore tread carefully when they try to explain what happened to their school.

However, the response to change and loss is decidedly different for boys and girls. Boys vehemently denounce what has happened to the school, much
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more than the girls, and although they also don’t want to be seen as racist, they have less trouble finding whom to blame for their current woes. Furthermore, the boys are more disgruntled about the changes at the school and the situation they find themselves in. It is their identity that is most under stress. They not only deplore the situation, they morally condemn it, and rebel against it. Alex says:

The white kids, I don’t know, but suddenly they disappeared from the school. You only see white people in grades 11 and 12. Most of the guys, the proper people, the proper people, go to DLR and GS, because that is the more popular school, the more expensive school also. There won’t be any trashy kids there, kids with trashy background coming there destroying your life … you have a lot of them here. There was a guy that stabbed me with a pen. His father died a few years ago, and his mother died in grade 8 as well. So that is classified as trashy. But my mother also died a few years ago and I am not a rebel. I don’t do stuff like that. Stab people, and things like that.

Alex clearly connects the changes with the new student population of “trashy kids” and the violent experience he had with them. Note the connections and oppositions Alex makes: proper people versus trashy kids; popular versus violent; rich versus poor. He connects class and social issues, along with social mobility, which he doesn’t have. Alex perceives that the school has two types of students: the “proper” youth, who do their work and have discipline; and those he categorizes the “rude and trashy” youth, who have no discipline, are bad-mannered, and “destroy” his life. He justifies this moral frame by directly challenging the idea that someone’s background and hardship should be taken into account if we judge someone’s immoral behavior with his anecdotal evidence. In other words, he creates a strong moral boundary between those two positions.

How can we explain this strong appeal to morality? In line with the social norm, Alex does not speak of “black” or “coloured” kids (the two new groups present at school) but of “trashy kids” and still stresses that what he perceives as bad behavior is not necessarily caused by race but from the circumstances the coloureds live in. Indeed, he does not want to be seen as a racist. Although Alex and his friends clearly condemn the coloured and black students for “destroying ‘their’ school,” they will say that they are indifferent to the changing racial composition of the school.

School is important for Alex. As much as he likes to hang out with his friends, a close group of white Afrikaans boys from his school, he also works hard at school. His father is a prison ward and, says Alex, “would not be happy if I did not do well at school.” Luckily, these days Alex is one of the best students at school. He often receives the first rank of his class, an honor that used to carry considerable prestige. Such titles do not mean much anymore, he says, because his school has changed. Here is what Alex says about the new coloured students in school:
The coloured guys don’t like me in the school. But I am not under the influence of them. I don’t smoke with them. I don’t do that with them. I don’t fight with them. I don’t do anything with them because I don’t like them at all. … The other thing about the Coloureds is that if you come into a class, and you do well in that class, they don’t like you. That happened to me this year. I moved subjects as one subject felt away. I went to the ‘cooking class’ which is mostly black. And I became also the best in that class. It is all about how you do your work. You must just put effort into your work and then you also get good marks. I can’t talk to them because then they shout at me, swear at me, and throw racial names at me. I just walk off because I can’t call them on their racial names because then they call me in with the headmaster.

Le Roux, one of Alex’s friends, has a history with other races that is different from the children who grew up in the city. Until the age of 10, Le Roux lived on a farm in the Eastern Cape with his grandfather and grandmother. He played with the black children on a daily basis there. Today, he uses this history when he talks about his concerns with the changing school. Like his friends, he says he does not care about the racial change at the school. He says:

Well, it doesn’t bother me. I don’t care … I don’t care about how many white or coloured or black people are in the school. As long as I have my friends I’m happy … I don’t see why I have to care about it … because I’m not like a racist or anything. … Actually when I was like 6 or 7 till about the age of 10, I lived in the Eastern Cape and then … I went to like a black school and then I learnt to speak Xhosa and stuff like that. My best friends were Africans and I really miss them, because I don’t know where they are.

Le Roux says that he does not care about the changing school, but the reason why he says so is because he seems to equal the changes in the school with the influx of students of another race. If he would care about the change, he seems to think, he would be seen as racist. He preempts such accusations by using his own personal history as proof that he is not a racist. And maybe they are not. But this does not mean, as we will see, that the boys are not preoccupied by the changing racial hierarchy at the school.

If we consider the girls, we see a very different picture. They do not have such a strong moral view on the changes in the school. They do not straightforwardly blame the new students for the changes they experiences. Sometimes, they do hint implicitly and indirectly at this connection, but the “they” in their stories of loss often remains vague. In general, girls are more eloquent in explaining how the school has changed and how sad that makes them. Of course, just like the boys, they wrestle with interpreting change. But they find different solutions and different interpretations of the change. Most remarkably, the girls never say they do not care. Instead, loss is often named instead of denied.
Their response to change follows two different routes. On one hand, girls do often openly admit the sad effects change has had and in that way deal with the emotional consequences of loss upfront. Regularly, they will say that the changes are “actually sad” and that you “have to get used to it.” They will say they sometimes “daydream for themselves.” On the other hand, they interpret change more positively. They legitimize, neutralize, or nuance it. For instance, they will stress the necessity of the changes, or at least some of the changes, in school. They say that “you just cannot have an Afrikaans school anymore.” They say change isn’t that bad because “it is still a very good school” and “every school has its problems and ups and downs.” Students will “still learn the same thing” and the school will go on “regardless of color.” The girls will also say they agree “with some changes and with others they do not” and that now, for instance, the teachers “have time for you.”

Both strategies make them less judgmental in their causal attribution. Girls do attribute the changes at school to the students at the school, but in a more inclusive way. For instance, Marilee says this about the school:

The children who are in the school make it bad, and make it bad for the outsiders to see: “OK, look what they do when they walk to the taxi, or to the bus, look what they do. We can’t put our kids in that.”

Both girls and boys are thus influenced in their talk by the social norm of nonracism, but to a very different extent. It is evident that in Alex’s dichotomous moral view, the terms “proper” and “trashy” are a stand in for race, for black and white. Such a difference in response makes us curious as to the difference in racial relationships at school. The questions why Alex and his friends respond so differently to loss, and whether this different response ultimately derives from a different experience of loss or from a different response to loss, can only be answered if we analyze their talk more closely. Particularly their race talk: what does it mean—at least to them—to be a small group of white boys in a school dominated by coloured and black boys?

13.4 Race Talk

How to deal with the change and the loss, and to develop new relationships with the racial other? How to respond to the new coloured and black majority at school? It is evident that the boys and girls have found very different answers to these questions at Groot Trek, and their racial talk should be analyzed to investigate why this is. With the new coloured majority, all white students have to reposition themselves. Depending on who we take as our guide, these changes have been not so big or more radical. If the boys are to be believed, their position changed radically and racial relationships have been antagonistic; if the girls are to be believed as well, not much changed at all, and they now have friendly racial relationships. Gender matters when it comes to racial relationships at Groot Trek.
We Have to Stand Together

If Alex and his friends are to be believed, the problem with racial relationships at school is not so much that they do not like the new coloured boys in the school, but rather the opposite: that the coloureds do not like him and his friends. They say the new social norm of nonracism gives the coloured boys a new edge: they are able to discriminate against white boys, while white boys cannot discriminate against them. The boys feel that with the new composition in school, they are regularly challenged and even harassed. Alex says:

They (the coloured students) don’t want to hang with you. You are seen as a whitey. They blame us for apartheid. Now they don’t want to be friends with us … I know that. They call you a whitey and stuff like that. And you can’t call them on their racial names, because then you are a racist. You keep you mouth shut and stay out of their way. Not that you are scared of them. There can be a context where you call them on their racial name … It happens every day, in the hallway and stuff if you knock one of them, the leader of the group will say to you, “Hey whitey, kom net myn pad uit” (get out of my way) … It is a daily experience, but I’m used to it now. I’ve been here for four years now.

The power has turned, and Alex clearly voices his discontent about how the changing social norm in the school works to his disadvantage, both verbally and physically. He is confronted with intimidation by coloured boys and feels he has to keep a low profile. He is literally being pushed around. Recently, Alex and his friends had to move from their favorite place in the courtyard, because of a group of coloured boys that wanted their place. It is evident he feels he is now in the disadvantaged position. He says he isn’t scared, but it is clear he is affected. The coloured boys at school, who often come from the more rough neighborhoods in Cape Town, have the upper hand.

Although Alex and his friends now hang out with only white friends, they have not grown up doing so. They weren’t born in one of Cape Town’s relatively safe, all-white neighborhoods and growing up, many experienced tough crime incidents. Nor was their primary school all-white. They often were part of mixed-race groups doing activities; for instance, Alex with his BMX bike riders. Also, much more than the girls at school, the boys hang out in the racially mixed neighborhoods surrounding the school. Every now and then, they go to bars, including what they call “coloured” bars. They drive themselves to their after-school jobs where they work with coloured clients, and explore the streets just hanging out. In other words, they have always hung out with coloureds, and until recently they weren’t known at school for racism. It is also true that even today, the racial boundaries aren’t completely closed. The boys often make jokes with their classmates across the color line, playing on stereotypes and prejudices across the racial divide. What is it, then,
that makes these boys at 16 such rebels and hold such a strong antagonistic narrative?

For one, their attitude has to with group dynamics, and the composition of his group in particular. Some of the dynamics changed when a new boy, Victor, joined Alex and his friends after he moved to Cape Town from Witbank, where he attended a mostly white school. Although he hardly speaks up, he is the most radical of the boys, and often makes racial jokes.\textsuperscript{8} But it would be too simple to argue he simple “infected” the other boys with his prejudices or “set them on the wrong path.” In fact, talking about racial prejudices, Viktor says that he learned at Groot Trek that many of his prejudices about coloureds were not true. He says:

Um … mainly … I used to think that they … they’re lazy and they didn’t want to work and stuff like that, but that’s not true; they’re just as equal as I am, so yeah…They’re not actually lazy … Like I said, they’re better than me and stuff like that … I think … if you’re clever you’re clever … if you’re not lazy you’re not lazy. I admit, I’m lazy and I know it and I’m not that smart.

Victor, “the racist,” affirms that many of his prejudices did not turn out to be true. It seems, therefore, that the boys’ position has less to do with prejudices, and with Victor’s influence on it, but rather has to do with something else: how boys determine their hierarchy in school through physical challenges and how the white boys lost position in the school hierarchy.

Victor is most respected by the boys for being a tough fighter. And fighting matters for boys at school, and certainly for these boys. Alex and his friends have a specific storyline that they use to interpret the changes at the school, and fights play an important part in it. When they arrived at school, they say, back in grade 8, they were “young and innocent” but through various (violent) incidents, they have “learned their lesson.” The boys say that now, after what they have gone through, they have learned to “stand together” and to “stand up” for each other. They are a group that looks after themselves. Such a storyline signifies not only how the boys feel (or have felt) threatened at school, but also that they are now longer the dominant racial group at school. Not even now, when they are older and in the highest grades, the boys feel they are “ruling” the school.

As a consequence, in their racial talk the boys constantly challenge the new hierarchy. They try to subvert the new hierarchy by accusations that coloureds are “posers” and “not for real.” Chris says:

There’s a lot more people who think they can rule the school, students who think, yeah, they’re the boss and nobody should mess with them and stuff and try and show that they’re the man … and in the old day, like when in grade 8 everyone was getting along fine and everything, and now it’s like … it’s not like gangsterism and stuff .It’s people that try to be gangsters … they try and act and be something that they’re not. And maybe that’s the problem
Chris argues that the new boys only try to act like gangsters. He thereby suggests that they have not obtained power and the upper hand in school—they only play for power. It is talk to suggest that coloureds are inauthentic and that they are not the bosses at school. They only like “to play” the boss, they say. This talk is also translated in racial terms. They like to speak of a “coconut” for someone who acts like a coloured but has a white skin and they speak of a “bounty” for a coloured who acts like a white person. Both types of behavior are strongly disapproved of by the boys.

The boys also stress that discipline has to be reinstalled in the school. In this way, they say, everybody will have “their place” and know “what he should do.” This call for discipline echos one of the teachers, but contrasts sharply with the behavior of the boys in and outside of class. Often, they are the most active disrupters of the classroom. Particularly some of the new coloured teachers are relentlessly teased and bullied by the boys. The call for discipline should therefore be read as a wish for the past; a time in which they still had their top position. They don’t desire discipline, at least not literally. They desire their old place in school—at the top of the school hierarchy, the place they have lost—to be restored.

**But We Are All the Same**

The story most girls tell about race is remarkably different. Maybe it is not even so much of a story the girls tell. Rather, they have a set of bridging arguments in their race talk to argue that they think everybody at school is the same. What ties their stories together is neither moral condemnation of the newcomers nor complaints about loss of power and racial inauthenticity. Rather, they present a variety of arguments to argue for equality between students and for the value of sameness. They practice a discourse of diversity.

Girls have various arguments to suggest all people are the same. Girls will say things like “you are who you are” and that whether they like you does not depend on what language you speak. They say that everybody has the same problems and talks about similar things, because on the inside “everybody is the same.” They know the prejudices—and they counter them. Nobody should be judged based on the outside. They say that “you shouldn’t judge a book by its cover” and that they don’t judge by the color of your skin. Instead, they are also positive about the value of diversity. They say they like to learn about cultures. With friendships, they express pragmatism. Marilee, for instance, says:

> You can be white, black, or coloured. It really doesn’t matter to me. It’s about how you feel about the person. You can be pink for all I care. If we get along, if we click, then I’m going to be friends with you.
Girls thus see their fellow coloured students in a very different light. There is no hint of a jockeying for power, no sense of a loss of status or position. Again and again, they stress sameness and equality. Race is said not to be an issue anymore. Although a few girls can be caught on expressing prejudices, the girls equally argue they often feel uncomfortable with other people’s prejudices. They sometimes feel they have to police other people. Rochelle says:

I felt ashamed a number of times, by the way other people act or the way they talk about blacks or coloureds or Muslims or whichever different religions. Then I feel ashamed of them, because they don’t want to try to get to know these people … they’re judging them before they get to know them … it’s like judging a book by its cover. I mean some of the plainest books can be the most interesting … and that sort of happens regularly, no matter what color your skin.

Rochelle openly acknowledges that she is ashamed. She elegantly pleads against any racism with the metaphor that you should not judge a book by its cover. Why girls talk so differently about race as boys is something I will discuss in the conclusion. But it is clear that this gender difference also has repercussions for the youths’ dealings with their ethnic identity, their Afrikaner identity, and the burden of apartheid. Again, we see the boys talk and act in a very different way than girls, at least, at Groot Trek.

13.5 CULTURE TALK

In post-apartheid South Africa, much of what used to be official Afrikaner culture has become discredited, because of its racist undertones. Moreover, Afrikaner itself as a label has become discredited. At Groot Trek, what used to be a wide display of Afrikaner cultural practices has all but disappeared. The school itself is rapidly on its way to becoming fully English. History classes are now about the struggle against apartheid. The story of die Groot Trek of the Afrikaners, to the North, is hardly known among the students. If you would speak to the teachers, you would hardly guess there once was a thriving Afrikaner culture in the school. But there is also the weight of the history of apartheid. Up until a certain point, also, all white Afrikaans students at the school feel a sense of guilt and shame in connection to the apartheid era, but boys and girls acknowledge and verbalize these feelings differently.

REAPPROPRIATING AFRIKANERSCHAP

Both boys and girls are aware that Afrikaans as public language is under pressure in South Africa. They speak of Afrikaans as having “no use” and that the language is “dying out.” But they also feel, and stress, the burden their generation carries. The common storyline used to convey the injustice felt of this burden in their narratives is that they were only 4, 5, or 6 years old.
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during the abolishment of apartheid. They feel they cannot be guilty of something that their parents, or even their grandparents, did. Students see apartheid as a wrong act for which the actual culprits—the older generations—should feel guilty. At least, that is how they construe their first response toward questions of collective guilt. But again, the girls in their response go much further to investigate the question why they should feel guilty or not. More curiously is, given the facts about Afrikaans and the awareness of guilt, the boys are still very much interested in their Afrikaner identity.

For boys, being an “Afrikaner” is very much alive. At Groot Trek, the boys are obsessed with their Afrikaner past. They love to play around with the “forbidden” symbols of the past. This reappropriation of Afrikaner symbols causes quite a stir with the school management. It almost seems as if the primary means for Alex and his group to engage with the racist history of their ethnic group, was to rebel in school. On their hands, you would see pen drawings of old Afrikaner crosses. On their phones, they would have signs of old Nationalist Afrikaner flags. During the yearly sports day, they had named their team provocatively the AWB, an abbreviation of the *Afrikaner Weerstands beweging*, a right-wing Afrikaner group erected in the 1970s but which is still active today. And the boys loved discussing Afrikaner history with each other and the teachers. At school it seemed to be their favorite way to rebel. They knew such signs are disapproved of by the staff, but they will go a long way to argue for their legitimacy, and the staff has a difficult time reining them in. For instance, after an initial debate and refusal, the AWB team in the end was allowed to participate at the sports day.

How to understand this rebellious use of the ethnic past? To analyze their engagement with the past a little deeper, I again bring up the boys’ responses to an Afrikaans song that had become immensely popular at the time of research (spring 2007), the song “De La Rey” from the singer Bok van Blerk. The song’s lyrics caused a stir in South Africa because it seemed implicitly a call for new Afrikaner leaders, a call with nationalistic undertones. The response to the song by the boys is revealing, and therefore is discussed in depth. Not only because it again showed how gender matters, but it also signals how the boys’ experiences and emotions at school are connected to the wider world, the media, and the hype about the song.

Most girls at Groot Trek shrugged their shoulders about the meaning and importance of the song. Marie, for instance, said this about it: “I think it is just another Afrikaans song.” This was different for the boys. With Alex and his friends, however, the song touched a raw nerve. Le Roux, Alex’s friend who worked with him at the clothing store, remembers when the song came out. He says:

When that song “De La Rey” came out, I saw in the media how many white people are still there, and are very proud of their culture. That’s when I
became more aware of it, not because of what “De La Rey” had done or whatever. It is because I saw all the white people who are proud of their culture so I also became more proud. Before I wasn’t that bothered about it … it hadn’t interested me so much.

Surprisingly, maybe, that from what Le Roux says, it is evident that his Afrikaner identity had not always had his interest. Rather, Le Roux suggests that the song came at a very particular time for him, at a moment the changes at the school started to really affect him. Tellingly, also, Le Roux downplays the historical references of the song. He argues that what influenced him was the media’s portrayal of the response of the Afrikaner community: the way the song seemed to speak to the feelings of a great many Afrikaners. The media showed him that as an Afrikaner, he could still “feel pride of his culture.” Le Roux felt his culture could still be respected. In other words, as a white Afrikaner, he felt recognized.

But there is another aspect to the reaction to the song too, which does not so much have to do with feeling recognized, as with feelings of belonging. Le Roux says that the image of “all those white people” made him also “feel safe.” He realized at the time, he says, that he was “not alone.” This suggests that the song’s resonance in the community is intimately connected to his experiences at Groot Trek. He says:

Obviously, when you sit in a class with a lot of English people you don’t feel that, well … you feel teruggetrokke (withdrawn) but when there are more Afrikaans then you feel more at home, so that’s the main reason.

The song helped Le Roux to no longer feel alone. It helped him also feel at home again at school. But this has not been an individual process for him. All the boys, Le Roux says, were equally touched by the song. And the song strengthened the bond between them. Le Roux says:

My friends, all of them … I feel we all realized it at the same time as the song came up … it was actually at one braai we all stood and sang the song, sang out loud, showing that we’re proud of it and that we didn’t care if they know that we are showing that we are proud of our culture or whatever.

The song obviously touched on the boys’ need for recognition and belonging at school and in society. But there is something remarkably indignant about the way Le Roux phrases the experience of singing the song. He presents it not only as an experience of feeling together, but also as an act of resistance, maybe even of defiance. He presents it as an act to show the world they still are proud. He stresses his indifference to what the outside world thinks of them. He says they didn’t care if they knew that they were showing that “we are proud of our culture.” According to him, this was the appropriate way to show that Afrikaners are still there, and are still proud, and are indifferent to what other people think of them. In other words, as much as the song seemed to touch the boys in their feelings of alienation, they use it in an
aggressive way to demand respect for who they are. The boys show a similar angry and aggressive response when they speak of consequences of apartheid. Le Roux says:

I think that they should feel responsible, the people who done it... I still feel ... how would I say ... angry at it ... because it is my forefathers who have done it ... and people look at me in a different way because they have done it, now they think I’m the same, but actually I’m not. I’m angry at the situation that I’m in. That they are picking on us for what they have done.

On the question whether he feels responsible for what happened during apartheid, Le Roux both acknowledges the responsibility of the older generation and dismisses his own responsibility. What is most revealing about Le Roux’s angry statement is how it mixes three separate issues and connects them together: his possible responsibility for what happened in the past, his anger about the generation before him, and the stigma that therefore is attached to him. He is angered by the difficulty of getting rid of the stigma, even though he assures himself that he knows he is different.¹⁰

This does not mean, however, that the boys are unaware of the hardship of blacks and coloureds. As we already saw with Alex, the boys know that many coloureds have grown up in difficult circumstances. Chris, the most reflective of the boys, says he sometimes wonders why coloureds live in such dire circumstances. Speaking about how he feels about what Afrikaners have done in the past, he says:

Sometimes, when I see how people struggle and what their lives are like, like shacks and stuff, squatter camps and stuff ... how did it originate? Where did it come from? ... Most from apartheid ... those people couldn’t get jobs and their children couldn’t have their education and now they’re sitting there with children, without food, shelter or anything and then they must suffer the consequences and ... it’s almost like it was a stupid decision. Why do that? Why can’t everybody just be equal? Sometimes I feel ashamed ... it’s like almost you don’t want to think about it, because whenever you think about it you start getting depressed and then you start feeling ashamed, so it’s like you try to avoid it and try to just go on with your life ... they have problems but you have problems as well ... you have to concentrate on your life and not worry about theirs.

Chris gives an eloquent explanation why he only rarely thinks about what Afrikaner people have done to others in the country. He knows it must have been apartheid that still causes all the hardship, and he obviously feels bad about it. But thinking about other people’s problems only makes you more “depressed” and “ashamed.” In the end, he simply says that the boys have their own struggles too. It seems an honest statement about the reality of the lower middle class across the racial divide.

One of the struggles the boys face, and one that angers them in particular, are the new government programs for affirmative action. Le Roux is very
clear about his discontent and the feeling that the programs are unfair. He says:

Because of affirmative action, it is more difficult for my friends and me to get a job. It is just a fact. My old friends, some of them, that are working age now, they are battling to get the jobs that they want...And the universities, if they give bursaries and stuff, 80 percent has to be to black people and the other 20 percent has to be coloured or white. So yeah, they would choose one of them before they choose you, which I think is unfair.

The opposition against affirmative action is uniformly shared amongst boys and girls. Maybe the boys are only more adamant in their resistance to it. But they speak of it in similar language. It is seen as "unfair" when referring to their choices of jobs and education. It is the investment of boys in Afrikanerdom that really sets them apart from the girls.

**Disinvestment in Afrikanerskap.**

When asked about their Afrikaner identity, girls will tell you it is sad that Afrikaans is used less and less in South Africa. But they do not seem to mind that loss all that much. Girls notice that "culture" is disappearing out of the school but they also stress the cultural differences between the coloured and white Afrikaners are not that big. Often, they do not give specific reasons why their interest in Afrikaner identity is limited. Rochelle, for instance, says that she thinks it is just not important in what she calls the "real world"

If you go out into the real world, Afrikaans is fading away. You have to talk English for instance or another language. But Afrikaans, you can't just stay Afrikaans, and talk Afrikaans the whole time, because it's not going to get you far.

Rochelle is not just neutral toward Afrikaans. She seems to accept that Afrikaans cannot hold its dominant position in South Africa. In general, girls tend to connect questions of responsibility, guilt and shame, and the possible stigma that causes these feelings less easily. They also do not connect these questions directly to the downside of the new affirmative action programs. To the question whether Rochelle felt responsibility or shame for the apartheid years, she says:

Um … not responsible, but ashamed. I actually find it difficult. When they talk about the past and things that happened and things that happened to people, whether they were black or white…it makes me feel ashamed…it makes you feel ashamed that there was such a thing as apartheid…it's just…I couldn't really give examples but there have been times that I felt apartheid wasn't right.

**13.6 Conclusion**

Die Groot Trek School has radically and racially changed—from desegregation to resegregation within a decade. This provides the essential
Institutional context to interpret the talk and behavior of Alex and his friends: the condemnations of non-white students, the re-appropriation of Afrikanerdom, and the rigid moral boundaries are all connected to the loss of meaning they experience at school, and their shameful response to it. Die Groot Trek School saw rapid change, which challenged the school's practices economically, socially, and culturally. Economically, the school is strapped for money, as many new students are unable to afford the relative low school fees. Socially, teachers struggle to adjust to the new influx of students, who have very different economic and cultural backgrounds. Culturally, customs at school, like singing the school anthem and practicing school sports like rugby, are under pressure. Some customs have disappeared. The majority of teachers are still white and Afrikaans. They needed to adjust to change and loss—and explain it to themselves—without the racialized explanations they might have relied on in the past. The staff seems to have accepted the loss of white students, but without adopting many changes to the school's institutional practices.

The Afrikaans students lament the changes at school, and the feeling of loss it brings. They experience this loss practically and symbolically. Extracurricular activities like sports and arts have disappeared. But also more ephemeral things like the status of academic excellence seem to have melted in thin air. For the lower-middle-class students, school is no longer an object of reference and prestige—a cultural symbol invested with pride. It no longer functions as an anchor point for a positive, cultural discourse; a source for belonging or a secure identity. Students fail to comprehend why the changes have fallen upon them. They struggle to cope with the loss, to manage the turmoil of feelings it brings, in part, because they are ashamed about what happened to the school. Although the students are all challenged by these changes, boys and girls have found very different emotion management strategies.

In response to the loss and shame, the boys opt for a rebellious stand. They take an aggressive posture that masks their feelings and cultural dislocation. Their response is a tale of integration gone wrong. In search of identity, they reclaim their Afrikaner ethnicity to harness a masculine response to their status loss and cultural confusion. In the past, schools provided Afrikaner boys a solid masculine identity, in which they would be praised for their academic and athletic performances. They have lost that status. Today, they struggle to compete for dominance and prestige with the coloured and black boys; boys who are often more streetwise and form the majority. The boys respond to their feelings of impotency with masculine assertions about independence and moral superiority. By contrast, the girls acknowledge their feelings of loss and shame, about the school but also about the Afrikaner past. As a consequence, they are able to adapt more
successfully, not by ignoring the loss they experience, but by pushing themselves to accept the changed school.