# Ethnic and Racial Studies

## 'Structure liberates?': mixing for mobility and the cultural transformation of 'urban children' in a London academy

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# 'Structure liberates?': mixing for mobility and the cultural transformation of 'urban children' in a London academy

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**Abstract**

This paper explores how the creation of a socially and ethnically mixed student body relates to mobility within the context of Beaumont Academy. This authoritarian school opened in 2004 under the ethos 'structure liberates'. Based in a predominantly deprived, ethnic minority area of London, Beaumont seeks to culturally transform its students. With its outstanding GCSE results, the school has been championed as a blueprint for reform, yet the cultural implications underlying this approach remain unexamined. The ethos pathologizes the surrounding area while essentializing itself as an 'oasis in the desert' liberating students through discipline. The paper explores how mobility is embodied by students and the alterations or eliminations necessary to achieve it. These alterations produce raced and classed positions and bring them into focus, highlighting who needs to 'adjust' themselves to accrue value. Uncritical celebrations of mixed-ness conceal structural inequalities lingering beneath the rhetoric of happy multiculturalism and aspirational citizenship. These inequalities are exacerbated by a marketized education system.

**Keywords:** ethnicity; social class; inequality; education; social mixing; multiculturalism.

## Introduction

As neo-Nazi movements continue to grow across Europe, visions of multicultural Britain were given a death sentence by David Cameron in February 2011. Cameron linked the lack of a strong British identity with Muslim extremism on the same day that the far-right English Defence League held a protest march in Luton with banners reading

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'No more mosques'. Meanwhile, the hegemonic project of neoliberalism continues unabated with the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government as aggressive cuts and the marketization of public services systematically dismantle structures of local democratic accountability, all under the guise of unavoidable austerity measures in the wake of the banking crisis. Cameron's dismissal of the UK's August 2011 riots as common gangland looting exemplifies the government's failure to understand how deprivation compounded by racialized policing tactics, scrapping of the Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA),[1] staggering university tuition fees, a 22 per cent young unemployment rate and a national creed of consumption-equals-value coalesce to impact on young people's lives.

While more ethnic minority bodies occupy spaces of power than in previous decades, these gains exist alongside entrenched disadvantage where hierarchies have grown more subtle. Alexander (2010) reminds us that 'Ideas of race and practices of racism have always been moving targets, but this doesn't deny their continued materiality.' Puwar (2004, p. 32) describes how the physical presence of ethnic minority bodies is seen to create racial equality, where 'race' resides in non-white bodies and multiculturalism infers that more bodies of colour amounts to equality. Social and ethnic inequalities are bleached from the story as culture, style and interests become stand-ins, alleviating the messy mention of ethnicity or class. This points to the need to acknowledge the 'real effects' of ideological categories regardless of their constructed-ness where 'racism is a regime of power that damages our ability to sense and make sense' (Leonardo 2007, p. 275; Back 2010, p. 465). Drawing on Fanon, Nayak (2006, pp. 419, 416) asserts 'the ontological impossibility of race'; its fictitious status is given substance 'through the illusion of performance, action and utterance, where repetition makes it appear as-if-real.' The parameters of institutions, the treatment they mete out and performances they demand (re)produce race and class. Mirza (2009, p. 58) re-frames the cultural discourse on race a 'new post-biological discourse', where 'ideas about innate, genetic, scientifically provable difference are still at the heart of our thinking about race'. How far have we moved from 'the assimilationist thrust' of the 1960s and early 1970s and its essentialism that 'assumes an obvious, definable, homogeneous essence (British culture) into which the hapless migrant might be inducted, given a suitable dose of English and an undiluted diet of the official school curriculum' (Rattansi 1992, p. 15)? Beaumont's 'urban children' discourse draws on this assimilationist legacy, fusing racialized minorities with a denigrated working class to produce a culturally essentialist brew of chaos requiring discipline. Meanwhile the inequity that arises from the continuing focus on results, or 'the A-to-C economy', is concealed by individualization (Gillborn and

Youdell 2000, p. 198). Practices of selection have been shown to disproportionately disadvantage ethnic minority and working-class pupils, creating institutional landscapes that reinforce social hierarchies, even in mixed settings (Troyna 1993; Hollingworth and Manseray 2012).

Educational institutions are a pivotal site where nation-building is done, wider discourses commingle and the values and subjectivities of young people are shaped. I will argue that Beaumont's 'structure liberates' ethos does not eradicate hierarchies, but *structures* students through reiterating raced and classed norms. It does not act as a liberator, but contradictorily references the language of freedom and happiness while denying external structures matter.

## An educational panacea?

The assumptions regarding human nature underpinning educational policy and institutional practices deserve greater scrutiny. In the face of widening inequalities, the New Labour government continually portrayed education as promoting social mobility. Rather than critiquing a lack of practical equality, the emphasis rested on providing equal opportunities. In 1931, R. H. Tawney, Labour socialist egalitarian, described this fundamentally flawed approach as the 'tadpole philosophy', which consigned many poor legless, armless creatures to premature death on the premise that some of their friends might ascend and become frogs. Yet an evangelical belief in social mobility fuelled by a meritocracy promoting the enterprizing, acquisitive self persists and is presented as the sole solution to inequality. This managerial, 'what works' approach turns parents into consumers, puts schools into competition while pushing social justice concerns off the agenda (Ball 2008). New Labour replaced older forms of 'expectational citizenship', branded as engendering dependency and a poverty of aspiration, with a 'politics of aspiration-building' (Raco 2009, p. 438). New Labour's imposition of middle-class values, attitudes and behaviours as universal norms implicitly rest on culturalist racisms and class-based pathologies that ignore how hierarchical societies require losers (Gewirtz 2001). Poor parenting and deficient cultures were positioned as the central problems.

Academies were established primarily in poor urban areas, often with large ethnic minority populations, to break cyclical underachievement through 'establishing a culture of ambition' (Adonis 2008). My ethnographic research and interviews with students, parents and teachers was conducted at the celebrated Beaumont Academy[2] in Redwood, a fictitious borough in East London over a two-year period. During this time I routinely met one-on-one with twenty-five children from years nine and eleven. I draw on this research to examine how

intensively capitalist schools do not eradicate inequality, but re-entrench and reorganize hierarchies of value between students. I show this by exploring how social mixing and mobility is embodied by students and the alterations or eliminations necessary to achieve it, as these adjustments bring raced and classed positions into focus, highlighting who needs to 'do' work on themselves to accrue value. In the context of Beaumont, student (and staff) movements occur under the vigilant eye of a disciplinary regime that asserts its values by passing moral judgements and producing hierarchies that students navigate between, around and through.

Beaumont is continually evidenced to prove the academy pro-gramme's effectiveness and has served as a blueprint for numerous schools. Its influence over policy has grown as former head teacher Sir Stanton is now a key actor at a national level, celebrated by both Labour and Conservative politicians. Initially, academies received funding directly from central government, operated outside of local education authority (LEA) control with the token financial backing of a private sponsor and could determine their pay and conditions. The programme has been enthusiastically co-opted by the coalition government. Rather than focusing resources on deprived areas, the coalition is pursuing radical deregulation and centralization – para-doxically in the name of decentralized localism. Gove's grand claims to freedom, innovation and social mobility conceal academies alternative purpose as a privatization tool. This is underscored by the pro-gramme's inconsistent, opportunistic focus: initially, secondary schools rated as outstanding were automatically allowed to convert to academy status while other schools could apply; now, however, 'failing' schools are being forcibly converted. The coalition govern-ment's repackaging of Labour policy is disassembling the never-fully-realized comprehensive system by creating an overtly marketized one. Gove is driving this centralization through at an astonishing speed: Labour opened 203 academies by the time they left office in May 2010; as of April 2013 there are 2,886 academies. Performance management spreadsheets, quantifiable league tables, slick marketing, strict dis-cipline and professional appearance have become the key focus of this education market.

Gove has dubiously justified forced academy conversions by appealing to racial and social inequality. Twisting the lines of causality, he has referred to his opponents as 'ideologues who are happy with failure' who are really saying: 'If you're poor, if you're Turkish, if you're Somali, then we don't expect you to succeed. You will always be second class and it's no surprise your schools are second class' (BBC News 2012). The invocation of 'inequality' to impose further inequal-ity is an ingenious discursive conflation whereby resisting privatization of public services becomes equated with promoting prejudice.

## Structure liberates 'urban children'

Beaumont Academy opened in 2004 in the East London borough of Redwood where unemployment is twice the national average, half of housing is socially rented, and 40 per cent of Beaumont students receive free school meals. Statistics attesting to poverty and ethnic diversity are frequently juxtaposed with the school's outstanding test scores: in 2011, over 80 per cent of Beaumont's students received five A* to C grades at GCSE level, including maths and English, compared to just 54 per cent of students nationally. Eighty-two A-level students were offered places at elite universities, including seven at Cambridge. Beaumont produces excellent results, yet uncritical celebrations of the space's mixed-ness conceal issues of structural inequality lingering beneath the structures of its 'no excuses' culture.

During our interview, Sir Stanton reclined in his leather executive chair and described how the 'structure liberates' ethos rests on a philosophy that altruistically seeks to provide poor children with the opportunities that wealthier children enjoy 'to show that poor kids, working-class kids can do as well as middle-class kids do'. Stanton describes his second vision as:

> ...the belief that children who come from unstructured backgrounds, as many of our children do, and often very unhappy ones, should be given more structure in their lives... if they come from unstructured backgrounds where anything goes and rules and boundaries are not clear in their home, we need to ensure that they're clear here.

Stanton places the desire for working-class kids to have the educational advantages automatically afforded to the wealthy alongside assertions that these students come from unstructured, unhappy families. This corrective approach self-consciously applies rituals and routines that provide the structure that Stanton claims is absent from their homes. Yet not all children require this intervention. Stanton clearly differentiates between those who need structure and those who have it built in:

> ...you need more structure rather than less through experience in dealing with urban children... you can be a lot more relaxed and free and easy in a nice, leafy middle-class area where the ground rules are clear before they come in, where children go home to lots of books and stuff like that.

The term 'urban children' or 'Redwood children' is used by several teachers to describe a largely ethnic minority and working-class student body. A raced and classed urban child is produced and

contrasted with the leafy suburb's middle-class and predominantly white child. Stanton feels that routines are not necessary when dealing with these children because they come from disciplined homes with 'lots of books'. Stanton ties unstructured backgrounds to unhappiness and makes this unstructured unhappiness synonymous with the working-class, ethnic minority 'urban child'. Beaumont's structures are seen to aid the urban child by instigating academic success, which also creates happiness. Sara Ahmed's (2010, pp. 124–5) re-description of empire's civilizing mission as a happiness mission where 'human happiness is increased through the courts (law/justice), knowledge (reason), and manners (culture, habits)' and 'Empire becomes a gift that cannot be refused, a forced gift' illuminates Stanton's assumptions linking urban children to unhappiness. Ahmed (2010, p. 125) outlines how the unhappy other provides the premise of action, where 'colonial knowledges constitute the other as . . . being unhappy, as lacking the qualities or attributes required for a happier state of existence.' Similarly, Stanton's mission functions as a gift to unstructured unhappy students, forcing them to become less ethnic and more middle class so that they can move towards happier futures.

While poverty is briefly mentioned, Stanton's concern centres on creating opportunity and parenting practices. He singles out class, not ethnicity, as the single biggest hurdle to student achievement: 'I think class would be the biggest issue. A child going home to a home which doesn't value education, doesn't support their child, where there are no books, where there is no experience of higher education . . . that's the bigger problem.'

Class, or more specifically, working-class parents, are the 'problem', with their detrimental parenting skills and misplaced values. Stanton describes how Beaumont 'becomes a sort of surrogate parent to the child and the child will only succeed if the philosophy of the school is that we will in many ways substitute and take over when necessary.' Class becomes a malleable position that can be changed by the individual's adoption of aspirational attitudes.

As Valerie Walkerdine (2003, p. 239) describes, 'the neo-liberal subject is the autonomous liberal subject made in the image of the middle class.' Teacher Mr Buell describes the non-academic attributes cultivated by Beaumont:

> . . . your manners, the respect you have, your telephone manner, the way you are punctual, you attend school, you don't try to dodge out of responsibilities, you present yourself well, you can mix with other people. All of that we can do here because we immerse them in this high class culture. It rubs off on them.

Acquiring the hallmarks of 'high class culture' means 'acquiring good habits' and an 'affective disposition' where 'you learn to be affected in the right way by the right things' (Ahmed 2010, p. 129). Natives new and old can be structured into dominant value systems while broader structural issues surrounding race, class and gender are ignored, yet are simultaneously drawn upon to shape value judgements. Stanton describes Beaumont as 'an oasis in the desert', while the surrounding area is essentialized as a zone of pathological urban chaos.

## Reading race through class

Although class is named as the 'biggest problem', with two-thirds of students coming from ethnic minority backgrounds, there is an implicit, inevitable overlap between the working-class children whose families are portrayed as inadequate and children from ethnic minority backgrounds. Race becomes an embedded, yet unspoken element underpinning the term 'urban children'. The easy amalgamation and unspoken fusion of race and class is apparent through the comments of teachers like Ms Smith:

> Ms Smith: We are potentially more classist, if you like, than racist, to be honest.
> CK: Hmm. How so?
> Ms Smith: I think that sometimes when I look at the white middle-class children I wonder if they are getting away with things that other children wouldn't.

The idealized middle-class child carries implications of whiteness; ethnic minority children fall into the problematic working-class category outlined previously, as race is encapsulated in the term 'urban children'. It becomes a way to 'talk' race through class, sidestepping the need to address racism. Beaumont makes 'a commitment to "colour-blindness" rather than equality', as anti-racism is seen as outdated in our supposedly post-racial era (Lentin 2008, p. 313).

Scrutinizing who is included (and excluded) from the terms 'urban children' and who functions as the 'surrogate parent' demonstrates that 'interpretations of what children are and need patently reflect a white, middle-class cultural hegemony' (Gillies 2007, p. 145). Teachers find it easier to discuss class as a problem, which is unsurprising given the widely acceptable denigration of the working class through use of terms like 'chav' (see James 2013; Jones 2013) describes how abject class disgust is performed through various media outlets and creates a borderline whiteness 'contaminated' by poverty-ridden estates (public housing) and racialized via sexual relations with ethnic minorities. The

sluttish, loud, illiterate 'chav mum' with her gaggle of multicoloured illegitimate children is replaced by the (predominantly) white, respectable middle-class 'surrogate parent'; the respectable middle classes claim moral superiority through the working class's 'filthy whiteness' (Tyler 2008, pp. 25–6).

This acceptable class denigration becomes the back door by which race can be brought into the room without needing to announce its arrival. Gilroy's (2004, p. 40) call for 'liberation from white supremacy' and 'from all racialising and raciological thought, from racialised seeing, thinking and thinking about thinking' goes unrealixed. Via the construction of the 'urban child', we can see how the production of 'race, class and gender are not distinct realms of experience, existing in splendid isolation from each other . . . rather they come into existence in and through relation to each other – if in contradictory and conflictual ways' (McClintock 1995, p. 5).

## The consequences of staying still

Institutional structures shape social groupings in accordance with dominant value systems; however, these raced and classed structurings are also interrupted by students. Gazi and Poppy, both fourteen years old, each stay with their respective social groups in the playground and rarely attempt to circulate, yet become fixed in very different social positions. Although Poppy was born and raised in Redwood, she describes her social group as 'not typical Redwood kids', because they are conscious of being 'very middle-class'. Although she says she does not mean this in a 'snobby way', Poppy once referred to the students outside of the 'skinny jean crowd' as 'street kids'. Poppy frequently describes her and her friends as 'special' or 'weird', drawing boundaries between herself and the rest of the cohort. Reay et al.'s (2007, p. 1043) research on white middle-class families who send their children to comprehensive schools highlights how commitments to multiethnic spaces exists in tension with the defence of middle-class privilege and a 'belief in the "specialness" of white middle-class children'. Poppy is white British[3], lives with her professional parents in a Victorian house and is in the highest set. She is rarely in trouble, despite admitting to talking during lessons – something I frequently observed. Poppy goes to boutique salons and routinely frequents a fashionably gritty area of London.

Poppy says that there are divisions in the playground and people she never speaks to, adding that some people can move between groups and she is not one of them. When she first came to Beaumont, Poppy describes how she had enormous glasses and spoke very properly, but quickly toned down her accent, realizing 'it was a bit much'. Like many students, she thinks group divisions correspond to speaking style. She recounts trying to speak slang once, amusingly contorting

her mouth in an uncomfortable shape before announcing 'it didn't suit me' and 'just sounded wrong'. However, Poppy does comment that Lorna, another girl in her social circle, is 'pretty good at doing both accents', although she did not literally move between groups. When I ask her to describe the other social group, her initially diplomatic response of 'I don't like to put labels on things', moves to a guilty admission of calling them chavs. 'Chav' becomes a flexibly derogatory term applied not only to the white working class, but a multicoloured range of students. She adds that some of them refer to her group as nerds or geeks. While she says that her group is generally middle class, any reference to ethnicity playing a role in group formation is emphatically rejected. The majority of Poppy's group are white, but a few friends like Lorna are not, thus it is not a tidy picture of social distance determined by either/or dichotomies.

Meanwhile, Gazi sits at the opposite end of the social spectrum. He is an energetic, outgoing young man whose planner is routinely littered with detentions, mostly for laughing and 'immaturity' in his lower-set lessons. Gazi is Turkish Cypriot and Irish and lives on a council estate with his mother, stepfather and two younger siblings; he says his mum makes 'good money' working in a restaurant. While giving a tour of the school, Gazi pointed to a circular bench, calling it the 'blond nerd area'. This is the area where Poppy and her friends congregate. Although many of them are not blond, this area has the largest concentration of blond-ish and white bodies in the playground. Gazi recalls being introduced to them when he was new; they did not understand what he was saying and stared at him blankly. He says they speak English, but I point out he speaks English too. He says no, it was different – they speak posh English, they are posh people who he does not 'get' and who are not 'normal people'.

Gazi thinks that the nerds are boring goody-goodies who never have any fun and always follow the rules. After the disclaimer 'not to be rude or nothing', Gazi goes on to describe how they have 'no style' because they work constantly, listen to horrible rock music and cut themselves. He thinks the nerds hang out in parks, eat roast dinners and play in rock bands, while he likes to go to the cinema, listen to rap and eat chicken and chips. He accurately speculates that the nerds call him a chav, but Gazi refutes this label. After his passionate diatribe, Gazi pauses and admits that he is prejudiced against them because he does not actually know what they are really like. Ultimately Gazi thinks being a 'bad boy' is more fun and appealing to women.

Despite this segregation, there were limited attempts at mixing. Gazi had one friend from the nerd group, Fred, who 'had that long floppy hair', Even though Fred was a 'semi-emo', Gazi described him as 'cool' because he understood what Gazi liked and did not play his rock music around him. Several months later, Gazi told me that he had

made three new friends from the nerd group. Gazi had approached them during PE, saying 'hey dude' and they thought he was one of them. During this mixed-ability lesson, space was created for mixing. Gazi connected mixing to trying to lose his bad boy reputation and take school more seriously. Poppy also expressed wanting to be better friends with a black British classmate who had a great sense of humour, but found it difficult to make this social leap.

Poppy and Gazi's largely stationary stances may appear evenly sided; however, their immobility has very different consequences. Their respective practices and 'styles' actively make class and carry unequal currency. Bourdieu distinguishes between those who only have to be what they are as opposed to those who are what they do, and who therefore have to constantly prove that they are capable of carrying the signs and capital of national belonging (quoted in Skeggs 2004, p. 19). Poppy does not need to learn how to speak slang to acquire value – she is already positioned as the ideal student. Conversely, Gazi is continually being pushed to reform his behaviour and self-presenta-tion. His limited ability to modulate his speech and self-presentation means that he lacks the right affective disposition; he is not yet capable of carrying the necessary signs and capital. Gazi needs to speak properly, as his social forms are undervalued and deemed incompatible with success. He is the one who needs to 'move up', not Poppy, for she has already arrived. While social mixing may be optional for some students, I will now consider a few students who describe mixing as necessary for acquiring social mobility and value.

### 'Not one of those people who just sticks with one group'

Institutional and social structures are also manipulated or contested by students in pursuit of their own needs or goals, yet their navigation of these structures is made in relation to their position within it. Several students felt circulating between groupings was a positive practice. Joshua, a sixteen-year-old, high-achieving Nigerian student, says he moves from the Afro-Caribbean to the Asian to the 'Caucasian' group, 'having a laugh with each'. He describes how mixing 'opens you up' and prevents narrow-mindedness; you have to interact with and understand a range of people to discover the 'true beauty of life'. The capacity to move between ethnic groups was part of becoming a 'diverse' and 'dynamic person' because 'being British had changed'. Language features heavily once again, as Joshua describes Britain as a diverse country where you need to know how to talk to different people. He describes how some of his black friends do not feel comfortable with his white friends because there were expressions that the white kids would not understand. Yet Joshua says

he has 'achieved' an ethnically varied social group and can go anywhere with relative ease.

Isaac, a humorous Afro-Caribbean sixteen year old, relates social mobility to his interest in other people and how they 'get on'. Like Joshua, he feels one should embrace different groups rather than 'try to separate yourself off from others and be afraid of people who are different from you.' He thinks mixing around makes things better and it is what you need to do to get along in life. Mobility has personal benefits, for Isaac adds that he is 'lucky' to circulate, 'zipping in and out' with ease. By the end of year eleven, Isaac had decided to attend the sixth form, proclaiming that his days of 'messing about' were over because he had realized that this was a competition and he was going to turn it on 'full blast next year ... to be on top'. Part of getting on top involved Isaac shifting his friendship group to hang out with high achievers and thus gain entrance to the sixth form head Ms Gable's 'special club' that visited Oxbridge. Isaac felt being seen to be friends with the set one group would get him in her 'good graces', as the Oxbridge candidates were a 'private sly little club' comprised of 'more serious students'. This shift involves Isaac deliberately moving from a more ethnically mixed social group to a more white middle-class one in order to accrue benefits; future social relations become tied to the acquisition of educational advantages and this shift of self is visually displayed through physical placement.

These boys' narratives highlight a combination of altruistic and self-serving motivations for social mixing. While pointing to the importance of understanding others, circulating also aids the development of a dynamic self, free to move across social space. Mixing is related to social mobility, both spatially and culturally. A key element of this mobility is the capacity to modulate speech styles. Mixing becomes a way of resourcing the self; mobility becomes an achievement, un-fixing students from ethnicity or class so that they can accrue value. Ethnicity becomes a positive asset, provided that they can effectively perform white middle-class norms as promoted by Beaumont's training. Reay et al. (2007) highlight how white middle-class parents depicted their children's proximity to students like Joshua and Isaac as desirable as they accrued 'multicultural capital'. Aspirational ethnic minority children also functioned as symbolic barriers demarcating the white middle classes from their undesirable white working-class 'other'.

These students arguably function as what Ahmed (2010) calls 'conversion points'. Their positive social integration promises happiness as social mixing turns bad feelings into good. These young black men, two of whom have been institutionally honoured by being made prefects, are actively converting themselves and acquiring capital that can be deployed in the future through taking up the idea of integration and happy multiculturalism. They have converted the threat of the

pathological black body found in Beaumont's urban chaos discourse
into an exemplary black body.

### 'Just because it's ghetto doesn't mean it's bad': what needs to go to get mobile

Tameka, an outspoken and friendly Afro-Caribbean sixteen-year-old
young woman, has frequently been in trouble at Beaumont. She says
she can talk to anyone; however, Tameka's account of social mixing is
more complicated. One Beaumont rule dictates that groups of more
than six children in the playground must be separated, but Tameka
and several others discussed how ethnic minority student groups were
continuously broken up while white student groups were often
overlooked. Tameka describes how teachers persistently disperse and
reprimand her group more than others and attributes this to racism.
She explains that just because her friends 'spud' [she demonstrates
greeting by touching fists] does not mean they are selling drugs or
being violent, it was how they talked and 'just because it's ghetto does
not mean that it is bad.' While giving me a tour, we pass Brandon, a
tall black young man wearing a puffy black parka. Tameka points out
that someone like Brandon is seen as a troublemaker because of how
he looks, even though he is well behaved. We walked down a corridor
and Tameka pointed to Bridget, a white girl in her year, and said she
was naughty too. Bridget found this funny and started pulling faces
before a teacher told us off. Despite her blond whiteness, Bridget was
still naughty, yet she was clearly not part of the 'blond nerd' group.
The reading of bodies as 'bad' is formed through complex mutually
produced amalgamations of raced and classed hierarchies that persist
in hyper-diverse spaces. Tameka thinks that Beaumont has stereo-
typical ideas of Redwood as a ghetto where 'all the women are walking
around pregnant with prams' and 'every young man has been in
prison'. She said that if teachers see you laughing with friends 'they
just look at you and think "oh never mind, they're like that and they'll
never get anywhere in life".' These bodies become the origin of bad
feeling and serve as representations of deviance, regardless of actual
action or intent.

Unsurprisingly, Tameka does not identify with any class grouping as
this would only align her with a devalued position (Skeggs 1997).
Instead Tameka proudly says she is 'ghetto' because she speaks 'bare
slang', but also emphasizes that she is just a 'normal teenager' who has
everything she needs – a family, an iPod, trainers, brand-name clothes.
Caring about status was something that 'posh people' did because
'they always want to be better than everyone else'. Tameka has a few
posh friends who live in big houses and speak with Essex accents.
Despite their wealth, she thinks:

> ...they acts like us as well like, they try to act like us, so we can all fit in, so it's cool...sometimes I bring them down [to her estate] and like I'll show them how we do it like. And they'll be like, "but that's like, it's the same as how we do it like as well".

Referring to a large group of mostly white kids who always hang out together, Tameka says:

> They are exactly like one of us, most of them can be like us, I swear. Yeah. We are all the same, let's put it that way. Just that we've got different backgrounds, different skin colours, different ways...We're all the same.

Tameka draws value from being a 'Redwood girl' by taking negative raced and classed notions of Redwood and fashioning them into an authentic coolness that posh students seek to emulate or are even intimidated by. Manthia Diawara (1998, p. 51) discusses how John Travolta in the film *Pulp Fiction* can 'wear' blackness and achieve transcendence, whereas Samuel Jackson's coolness is innate; he's not acting and he cannot take it off – it is just who he is. While posh students may be able to try on this 'black *esthetique du cool*' and deploy blackness as cultural capital, Tameka's body is confined to an immanent coolness. Although she receives approval from peers, this is not the institutional authorization that has purchase in the wider 'legitimate' world. Yet Joshua and Isaac have achieved partial transcendence, within Beaumont at least, signalling that this mobile subject position is not universally available, but is a privileged identity position that creates new forms of power and may be more readily available to men (Adkins 2002).

Tameka occupies a complex and contradictory position. She actively points out racialized judgements while simultaneously conceding to Beaumont's demands. When talking about the formal sixth-form dress code, Tameka said she probably needs to be 'less street' and wearing heels and skirts would be 'good practice' and might make her more 'lady-like'. While Tameka sees a need to change herself, she also resists the idea that her practices are innately wrong and attempts to accrue some value through being a 'Redwood girl'. Like Ahmed's (2010, pp. 143–4) 'melancholy migrant' whose 'fixation with injury is read as an obstacle' to his own happiness and where the 'moral task is thus "to get over it"', Tameka refuses to accept her pathologization or an easy vision of happy multiculturalism. Her position is precarious; while she does not fully dispense with her ways of being, she is willing to 'practice' alterations perceived as beneficial to her future.

### 'Accidental' divisions?

Like Tameka, Joshua discusses the different treatment of groups in the playground, attesting to how white groups were left alone. He asserts: 'There must be some logical explanation, apart from skin colour. Because I think teachers are very rational people.' Unlike Tameka, Joshua does not want to describe it as racism, but says the different comportment of bodies by colour could justify discipline because 'black girls actually love hype . . . creating drama . . . they get really loud and there is no need for it. . . . whereas white people just sit there and talk casually, you can't really blame them . . . they are just compact, controlled and concise. The three Cs.' The expressive gestures and sounds issuing from some black bodies thus attract discipline, whereas the quiet, stationary white body engaged in casual conversation is visually non-threatening. Regardless of whether or not students are doing anything subversive, different aesthetic forms are assigned differential values. However, it is important to highlight that performing the three Cs is not limited to the white body, as Joshua said he avoided loud groups and his mixed-race group routinely displayed the three Cs in the playground. Although whiteness or blackness are not 'attached to respective white and black bodies but rather that race signs are encoded into everyday practice' (Nayak 2006, pp. 418–19), achieving academic success is still associated with 'acting white', or, as Fordham (1996) describes, by maintaining the existing system of power and domination. Despite the inconsistent disciplining of pupils, the vast majority of teachers and students explain social divisions through style, interest and background. 'Race' cannot be seen to matter; young people are well versed in colour-blind discourses. These contradictory stories highlight the difficulty of talking about inequality when inequality is presented as past tense.

### Conclusion

Beaumont promotes a neocolonial civilizing mission through its 'structure liberates' ethos, which pathologizes the urban area of Beaumont while attempting to graft dominant value systems onto students. These institutional structures are shaped by a competitive education market propagated by successive UK governments committed to a neoliberal doctrine of aspirational individualism. Students' social groupings are structured by these institutional norms that they navigate and circumvent from various positions within the hierarchy. Possessing mobility means possessing value, but mixing for mobility is only a necessary strategy for those who do not inhabit the classed and raced position of the ideal student. Supposedly more expressive black

bodies like Tameka's are consistently more heavily policed in the playground, while Joshua and Isaac can and do consciously perform 'whiter' forms of comportment – a tactic that reduces their surveillance and allows them to move with greater ease. These adjustments also highlight the problematic notion of mobility; rather than being depicted as an upward liberation, mobility has deeply defensive aspects, gendered boundaries and requires sacrifices (Walkerdine 2003).

Students occasionally show a willingness to transgress boundaries, but these 'ellipses, drifts and leaks of meaning' that could destabilize the constructed social order are not encouraged by Beaumont (Certeau 1984, p. 107). The academy structures the ideal subject through creating distinctions that attribute judgements and values through bodily and social orientations. These orientations form the basis of a moral economy, as Beaumont's moral distinctions of worth become social distinctions of value that are negotiated out in the playground (Skeggs 2004). Stanton demands a 'no excuses culture', claiming that mentioning social factors only 'entrenches mediocrity'. Yet this 'no excuses' mantra enacts a blinkered ignore-and-overcome logic. Divorcing students from their social positioning trivializes continued hardship, institutionalized racism and moral value judgements. Beaumont's 'structures' seek to 'liberate' children from pathological raced, classed identities, but in ignoring the power of inequitable structures they simultaneously reify them.

## Notes

1. The EMA supported sixteen to nineteen year olds from low-income households to financially stay in education.
2. The school, borough and all participants have been given pseudonyms so they may remain anonymous.
3. All the given descriptions of student ethnicity are how students described themselves to me.

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