Ethnographies of Power


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Relational comparison’ has roots going back to Gillian Hart’s work in South East Asia in the 1970s, although she developed the concept in her book Disabling Globalization (2002) and subsequent journal articles. It is a method that compares places, but also recognises connections between these places. Gillian Hart was my PhD supervisor and the concept of relational comparison exemplifies one of the most important lessons I learnt at graduate school, which was the inseparability of method and theory (the latter I had assumed would be a main focus at the University of California, Berkeley). However, research methods have not, on the whole, been central to the discipline of geography, at least compared to ongoing discussions by anthropologists about ethnography and sociologists on theory and method. While radical geographers’ strong critique of positivism in the 1970s fundamentally shaped the discipline and its theoretical developments (Castree 2000) when it comes to method, ‘doing rather than talking about it has been the dominant intellectual culture’ (Barnes et al. 2007, 1). Important exceptions are feminist and anti-racist geographers, who have long emphasised the inseparability of theory and the embodied practices of researchers (see, for example, Pulido 2002; Sangtin Writers Collective and Nagar 2006).
As other contributions to this volume show, relational comparison is part of a dialectical theoretical approach that drew Hart into close engagement with the work of Antonio Gramsci (see particularly chapter 7). However, this chapter foregrounds how Hart’s relational comparison approach grew out of her empirical research that centred on Java, Malaysia and, in particular, South Africa from the 1990s onwards. The primary focus is on the situated practices through which methods are constructed. While I hope to show that the relational comparison method has particular strengths, anyone who has worked with Hart knows that she does not impose a strict methodological regime on her students. After reviewing how Hart’s own research trajectory gave rise to the relational comparison approach, I show how my study of schooling markets in South Africa uses a research approach with broad affinities to the relational comparison method.

Hart describes the concept of relational comparison in an article titled ‘Relational Comparison Revisited’ in *Progress in Human Geography*:

I posited relational comparison in opposition to two other methods of comparison. First, by far the most common approach is based on pre-given bounded units or ‘cases’; it includes Weberian ideal-types, but much else besides. Second is the sort of approach that asserts an overarching general process, and sees comparative cases as variants of this process. Instead of comparing pre-existing objects, events, places, or identities – or asserting a general process like globalisation and comparing its ‘impacts’ – I argued that the focus of relational comparison is on how key processes are constituted in relation to one another through power-laden practices in the multiple, interconnected arenas of everyday life. (Hart 2018, 374–375)

The relational comparison approach thus conceives of places as always connected and stresses how social processes are constructed at multiple
scales. As we shall see, this approach both draws from and extends geographical thinking in important ways. How, then, did Hart come to advance this model?

**The East Asian roots of relational comparison:**
**From econometrics to power, local to global**

Hart began her PhD fieldwork in rural Java in 1975, a decade after President Suharto’s New Order government came into power. Key questions economists grappled with at this time included the reasons for the country’s high rate of economic growth and its main beneficiaries. Hart had trained at Cornell University in econometrics, an approach that prioritises large household surveys and sophisticated statistical techniques. Yet, as she explains, in the field this method ‘soon disintegrated’ (Hart 1986b, xiii). Econometrics had no vocabulary to explain gender struggles and class differentiation or connections between household production and the policies of the New Order state. By the time she finished her PhD dissertation on Java, Hart’s work was grounded in a single village and the study of ‘power, labor and livelihood’ (the title of her 1986 book).

While we should be wary of tracing neat origins of relational comparison, two aspects of Hart’s turn from econometric methods are instructive: the first is her attention to power and social relations, especially labour and gender; the second is her rejection of the local as a bounded entity. In the 1970s, Marxist political economy placed class relations at the heart of agrarian studies, a movement reflected in the launch of the *Journal of Peasant Studies* in 1973. On the ground in rural South East Asia, struggles over labour and debt forced Hart to reject a view of farm-households as apolitical units of production and consumption (Hart 1992). Hart’s approach to power was processual in the sense that she showed how social structures of class and gender were derived from everyday contestations and actions. She writes about Malaysia, her second major area of study: ‘The rules defining
property rights, labor obligations, resource distribution, and so forth are potentially subject to contestation, and must be constantly reinforced and reiterated’ (811).

It was Hart’s attention to gendered power relations, however, that animated one of her most well-known articles, her incisive critique of James Scott’s influential book *Weapons of the Weak* (1985). Scott, like Hart, worked in rural Malaysia. As the title of his book suggests, Scott foregrounded how peasants engaged in everyday forms of resistance such as foot-dragging and pilfering. In her response in the article ‘Engendering Everyday Resistance’, Hart (1991) revealed how women – less tied than men to subservient political patronage relationships – developed collective social identities that had critical political consequences. A year later, in an article titled ‘Household Production Reconsidered’, Hart elaborated a wider critique of Malaysia’s agricultural take-off as being a gender-neutral ‘green revolution’, arguing that mechanisation was ‘also part of an effort by large landowners and the irrigation authorities to bring recalcitrant women workers under control’ (Hart 1992, 810).

Though Hart abandoned the use of large survey data early on in favour of more detailed local research in one village, she did not conceive of the local as a bounded entity. She interrogated ‘the connections between macro political-economic forces and processes of institutional change at the local level’ (Hart 1986a, 196). Gender too, she argued later, could not be confined only to the household, ‘but is invoked and contested in a variety of institutional arenas as part of many kinds of struggles for power’ (Hart 1997, 15).

In theorising gender and class in a way that emphasises spatial connections, Hart was increasingly drawn to the work of Doreen Massey. Massey’s relational approach to space revealed the importance of understanding the local and global as mutually constituted; that is to say, social relations are always ‘stretched out’ across multiple scales. Massey’s scholarship is illustrative of the rich theoretical and methodological geographical questions in the 1980s and 1990s, some swirling around the study/theorisation of the ‘local’ (see, for example, Massey 1994;
Sayer 1991). When making sense of her research sites in Asia, Hart was influenced by these critical geographers, whom she says ‘blew my mind’ (Hart 2018, 373). And in the 1990s, Hart made two critical changes to her own location: she returned to studying her native South Africa and took up a geography position at the University of California, Berkeley, in the United States.

**The South African roots of relational comparison**

Hart returned to South Africa in 1990, the year that Nelson Mandela was released from prison and four years before the first democratic elections. The liberation movement had defeated apartheid, but the country’s economy had suffered from negative real growth for two decades. Educational facilities and property and land ownership were all massively skewed toward white South Africans. Black workers, who had played a major role in defeating apartheid, demanded jobs, skills and high wages – but big business held the keys to the economy. Yet, soon after winning political power in 1994, the African National Congress (ANC) adopted the broadly neo-liberal plan GEAR, which emphasised fiscal discipline and the need for foreign investment (GEAR stands for Growth, Employment and Redistribution, but as many have pointed out, it delivered none of these).

Eager to kickstart the economy, influential writers of South Africa’s early industrial policy became attracted to strategies that promised to benefit both labour and capital. Claims that fragmenting consumer markets signalled a new era of ‘flexible specialization’ (Piore and Sabel 1984) appeared to offer the possibility of a high-skill/high-wage industrial path. A second, widely celebrated model exampled by the ‘Asian Tigers’ (Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan) stressed the opportunities offered to developing countries by export-orientated industrialisation. Yet both the ‘flec-spec’ and Asian Tigers models glossed over South Africa’s racialised conflicts and ignored the literature on agro-industrial links in Asia and elsewhere.
Affiliated with what came to be called the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Hart’s early work (some of which was undertaken with Alison Todes) explored the rapid growth of small industries in the towns of Ladysmith and Newcastle, located in north-western KwaZulu-Natal. Beginning in the 1970s, the apartheid regime had used generous incentives to lure industries into semi-rural sites in an ambitious attempt to prevent black people from migrating to ‘white’ cities. This policy attracted numerous small, Taiwanese-owned factories, especially those in the textile and clothing industries, in addition to South African businesses. Hart’s point of departure, gained from her Asian experience, was that rural industrialisation could not be separated from questions of land redistribution, household organisation, gender relations and technological implementation.

Ladysmith and Newcastle, like all South African towns and cities, bore the deep scars of racialised dispossession. After 1948 the National Party government embarked on a massive programme of forced removals that extended and ordered colonial patterns of land ownership. Of particular significance was the removal in the Ladysmith/Newcastle region of thousands of families from ‘black spots’ where black people had bought freehold land. The apartheid state viewed the rightful place of black Africans as being in ethnic ‘homelands’ like KwaZulu. The history of dispossession and unequal land distribution in South Africa had far-reaching economic and political consequences.

In contrast to her experience in parts of Asia, where she argued that land redistribution had lowered the cost of living and underpinned a social wage, Hart (1998) was struck by how racialised land dispossession, and the attendant agricultural decline, had rendered KwaZulu-Natal’s factories unable to lower wages beyond certain levels. Gender relations also differed. In Taiwan, industrial growth rested on patriarchy within households, ‘whereby senior males exercise considerable (although not unilateral) power through control of inherited and acquired property’ (Hart 1996, 256). In South Africa, Taiwanese industrialists often failed in their efforts to control female factory workers. In the face of
growing unemployment, women embarked on complex migration patterns to urban and peri-urban areas. Modern industries, especially in low-wage sectors, often preferred women workers. In South Africa, ‘a few Taiwanese industrialists in Newcastle have sought to reconstruct paternalistic labour relations in new ways. The majority, however, resort to varying degrees of gendered and racially charged coercion in their relations with women workers’ (267).

As one of the few South African scholars with direct research experience in Asia, Hart saw stark differences between the two regions. In other words, she was critical of flawed comparisons, including the application to South Africa of oversimplified models of Asian export-oriented growth. This was especially important at a time when seemingly inexorable forces of globalisation were used to justify free-market policies in South Africa, as elsewhere. In her article ‘Multiple Trajectories’, she wrote: ‘Comparative Asian trajectories are salient not because they represent “models” to be emulated, but rather because the multiple histories of redistribution together with the diversity of institutional forms – here I particularly have in mind the township and village enterprises in parts of China – provide a means for contesting the disabling discourses of globalisation and market triumphalism’ (Hart 1998, 350).

As Hart’s long-term research deepened in Ladysmith and Newcastle, the relational comparison approach took firmer shape. The two proximate research sites had similar racial demographics, spatial forms and dependencies on Taiwanese-owned factories. However, Hart showed how different histories of dispossession and contemporary politics affected the two areas’ divergent trajectories. Compared to Newcastle, Ladysmith had more contested land removals and militant township politics. There was a lesser tradition of activism in Newcastle, a point underlined when a Taiwanese business leader stood for mayor in Newcastle as a supporter of the Inkatha Freedom Party. Inkatha, revitalised in the 1970s as a Zulu nationalist party, governed the KwaZulu homeland and opposed independent unions in a bid to attract capital to the region.
However, Hart’s study was relational, not simply comparative, because it conceptualised the local as connected to wider processes and places. Hart’s insistence on ‘multiple trajectories … of socio-spatial restructuring’ (see chapter 4 in this volume) provided a powerful critique of what she saw as the ‘impact model’, in which global capitalism bears down on passive ‘locals’ (Hart 1998, 2002). Hart’s relational analysis considered these two towns’ different trajectories in the context of their relationship to each other and to the outside world, including Taiwan and China. This analysis culminated in her 2002 book *Disabling Globalization*. Thus, to return to Hart’s description of her approach quoted at the beginning of this chapter, Ladysmith and Newcastle were not just two separate cases, nor were they just cases that illuminated a general process. A relational comparison approach allowed Hart to explore the divergent trajectories of Ladysmith and Newcastle in relation to each other and to outside places.

In 2016 Hart used the *Progress in Human Geography* lecture at the Association of American Geographers conference to return to the concept of relational comparison. One motivation for rethinking relational comparison was to position the approach ‘more explicitly as part of a spatio-historical method of Marxist postcolonial analysis’ (Hart 2018, 372). Since the original presentation of relational comparison, debates in geography about how to conceptualise the local and the global had receded without resolution. David Harvey remained a central figure in geography, prioritising class divisions, but feminist scholars and scholars of colour continued to ‘mess with the project’ by showing that capital accumulation depends in part on the production of difference (Katz 2006).

Hart’s Marxist post-colonialism contributes not only to efforts to recognise articulations between class and other social relations, but also to going beyond Western-centred approaches. From around the early 2000s, post-colonial geography established itself as a small sub-field, one written off by many geographers as relevant only to those studying the global South (Blunt and McEwan 2003). However, post-colonial urban studies, as it came to be called, intentionally parked post-colonial critiques at the front door of urban studies, a bastion of critical geography.
Jennifer Robinson’s book *Ordinary Cities* (2006) casts all cities as ‘ordinary’ and draws intellectual guidance from non-Western sources, including the Rhodes Livingstone Institute in Zambia, and her native South Africa. This built on her earlier arguments, positing, for example, that a ‘spatialized account of the multiple webs of social relations which produce ordinary cities could help to displace some of the hierarchizing and excluding effects of this approach’ (Robinson 2002, 545). Debates among urban scholars that include Jennifer Robinson and Marxists that include Neil Brenner have illuminated many a conference in recent years (see Brenner and Schmid 2015; Robinson 2016). Post-colonial urban studies, in its insistence that theory can come from ‘ordinary’ places and its use of a relational understanding of space, have many similarities to Hart’s relational comparison approach (see Ward 2010).

First published online in 2016, Hart’s article ‘Relational Comparison Revisited’ sought to clarify and extend relational comparison and its theoretical, political and empirical aspects (Hart 2018). First, she explains that her use of ‘relational’ is a dialectic one, referring to David Harvey and Bertell Ollman’s use of dialectics. She uses this to build bridges between Marxism and post-colonial urban studies. A second point she makes is the importance of undertaking critical ethnographic methods; here, ‘methods’ means undertaking work through participant observation in the field. This takes her back to her own research trajectory, beginning in a rural village in Java. Third, she draws from her work on populism in India and South Africa to think through ‘spatio-historical conjunctures’. Hart notes how the rise of Hindu nationalism and economic liberalisation in India in the 1990s had strong parallels with Jacob Zuma’s rise in South Africa. Her approach remains multi-scalar but begins, in this more recent analysis, at the national rather than the local scale.

**Relational comparison and schooling in South Africa**

From 2009 to 2019 I studied schooling marketisation in Durban, culminating in my book *Race for Education* (Hunter 2019). The study is
not strictly comparative, but it is relational in the sense that it considers changing connections among a number of schools and residential areas. The project’s point of departure was that tens of thousands of South African learners do not attend their local schools. Every weekday morning, in every city, scores of taxis, buses and cars move children, black and white, long distances to attend school. When children leave one school, they leave an empty desk for others to use and they take with them resources, including fees. Indeed, in the last three decades, South Africa has moved from having one of the most spatially and racially planned education systems to one of the most marketised systems in the world.

Schooling provides insights into long-standing ‘race–class’ debates in South Africa that rested on the question of whether inequalities were anchored in racial or class discrimination. The salience of race and class did not disappear when apartheid ended. While the black middle class came to surpass the size of the white middle class, there was not a simple move from ‘race apartheid’ to ‘class apartheid’ (Bond 2004). In the educational world, beginning in the mid-2010s, black students led a wave of protests at universities that propelled race to the foreground of South African politics. These were led by the ‘born-free’ generation (those born after the fall of apartheid), individuals who were ‘increasingly disillusioned by and … push[ing] back against the notion of the Rainbow Nation’ (Chigumadzi 2015, 1). Moreover, continued racism in schools and society clearly showed that apartheid segregation had not given way to ‘non-racialism’ – a guiding concept of the liberation movement and the post-1994 Rainbow Nation.

Wider afield, over the last 30 years one of the biggest changes to public schooling worldwide is its subjection to market principles. ‘School choice policies are sweeping the globe,’ argue David Plank and Gary Sykes (2003, vii). ‘In countries on every continent, governments have decided that giving parents more choices among schools is an appropriate policy response to local educational problems.’ As Stuart Woolman and Brahm Fleisch (2006) argue, South Africa was an ‘unintended
experiment’ in schooling choice. A crucial turning point came in the
dying years of apartheid, when the white minority state encouraged
white schools to desegregate classrooms but introduce school fees – in
part as a way for schools to retain control over admissions. After win-
ning power in 1994, the ANC ended formal discrimination in schools
and passed education legislation that eventually converted two-thirds
of public schools into ‘no fee’ institutions. However, it continued to
allow better-off schools to charge fees that financed the employment
of extra teachers and facilities such as libraries and computer rooms.
Parents with the means, therefore, chose schools in the marketplace.

The background to my study in Durban is as follows: the 1950 Group
Areas Act divided South African cities into racial zones based on one of
four ‘races’ (which by the end of apartheid were called white, Coloured,
Indian and African/black African). Figure 3.1 shows the three differ-
ent parts of Durban (or, more specifically, eThekwini Municipality)
considered in my study. The first is the township of Umlazi, one of
many huge urban townships that apartheid planners built for black
Africans, who were barred from living in (and often removed from)
‘white’ towns. The second is the Bluff, a formerly white, working-class/
lower-middle-class suburb located in south Durban. Though privileged
by apartheid policy, the Bluff area gained a rough-and-tough image
because its early residents typically worked at the nearby port or rail-
way yards and in other local industries. The third comprises the upper
parts of the Berea ridge that represent the heartland of ‘traditional’
upper-middle-class white schools that modelled themselves on British
private schools.

Durban, like all South African cities, is marked by massive economic
and educational divisions. Umlazi’s average per capita income is only
R1 900 a month (around £115 or $150).¹ Typical annual school fees
in Umlazi total around R200. In contrast, the formerly white Bluff
and Berea have monthly per capita incomes of over R10 000. Annual
school fees range from R10 000 to over R50 000. These fees equate to
formerly white schools’ employing on average nine privately funded
Figure 3.1: Durban study area

Source: Author

Note: In the apartheid period, the townships and suburbs were racially classified as follows: Umlazi (black African); Merebank and Chatsworth (Indian); Wentworth (Coloured); Bluff, Berea, Hilary, Seaview, Montclair, Woodlands and Westville (white).
Relational Comparison and Contested Educational Spaces in Durban

('governing body') teachers, in addition to those provided by the state on the basis of the school’s enrolment.

Because of the profound spatiality of urban inequalities, a learner from Umlazi who climbs the schooling hierarchy today will almost inevitably travel north or west – whether to benefit from better facilities and higher average pass rates or (as noted below) from the ‘cultural capital’ of a more prestigious English accent. A second pattern I examine appears to be anomalous: white children leaving the residentially whiter Bluff, where half of the residents are still white, to attend school in Berea, where fewer than one in three residents is white. This pattern took some time to evolve, but accelerated in the early 2000s when some Berea schools aggressively poached white students and when Bluff residents put more value on accessing what one parent called, in an interview, ‘Harry Potter schools’ (implying their fidelity to the British private schooling model).

How then do we study such schooling dynamics? Indeed, why should we? A well-known method for studying schooling is participant observation at one or several schools. Paul Willis’ *Learning to Labor* (1977) famously used ethnography to reveal how the rebellion of working-class ‘lads’ propelled them into working-class jobs. Pamela Perry’s *Shades of White* (2002) demonstrates how whiteness is constructed differently in two high schools in the United States, one predominantly white and suburban and the other urban and multiracial. For South Africanists, Nadine Dolby’s *Constructing Race* (2001) is an indispensable account of the early period of desegregation in a formerly white Durban school, showing how music and other popular culture mediated racialised interactions.

I conducted 90 interviews with school staff, usually principals or deputy principals, and was often shown around the school. I also interviewed, and in some cases got to know well, members of more than 200 families. However, I did not follow the well-trodden path of conducting an ethnography in a single school for three related reasons. First, South Africa’s colonial history makes the differences among schools much
more significant than those within a single school. Willis, among others, pioneered critical educational research in the post-Second World War period when divisions among secondary schools were deliberately flattened (in the United Kingdom most became ‘comprehensive schools’). Many scholars like Willis showed that a learner’s school is immensely important to her or his future and how, within the same school, middle-class learners did better than working-class learners. In South Africa, however, differences among groups of racially designated schools continue to be bigger than differences within particular schools. In 1969–1970, white children were funded nearly 18 times more than black African children, with the gap narrowing to 4 times by 1989–1990 (SAIRR 1992, lxxxv). Today, in the era of school marketisation, one can find in the same city a school charging no fees and another charging R50 000 a year.

A second reason for an approach that considers groups of connected schools is that it captures the dynamic processes shaping the marketised system. Whereas government funding formulas do direct extra resources to poorer schools, when children move to better schools, they take with them fees that enhance the quality of these schools. Schoolchildren’s movement is therefore a countervailing force to state redistribution and can, in fact, naturalise divisions in society. In contrast to classic work such as Willis’ Learning to Labor, which locates hegemony-making processes within schools, a focus on marketised schooling foregrounds what we might call ‘hegemony on a school bus’.

In other ways, analysis of the schooling market shows the active politics of race and class at work. Race did not wither away in South Africa’s new democracy; nor can racism be simply cast as a legacy of what is sometimes called the ‘apartheid mindset’. To more than just illuminate the ‘fact of inequality’, a relational comparison approach to race shows how racism is constituted through links between places (Goldberg 2009). In South Africa, such an approach can provide new insights into how race and class are spatially constituted phenomena that are always changing.
A third reason for my method is that learners’ daily movement shines a light on apartheid’s racial–cultural hierarchies – that is, it conceptualises schools as bestowing more than simply qualifications or credentials. Apartheid society valued ‘white’ cultural practices gained in schools – for instance, fluency in the official languages of English and Afrikaans. In contrast, the state established ten ethnic homelands for Africans and made African languages the language of instruction at Bantu Education’s primary schools. These cultural hierarchies have enduring legacies. Today, compared to someone attending a historically black school, a white or black learner attending one of the formerly white schools (constituting 7 per cent of all schools) has an advantage in finding work because many new jobs are English-intensive jobs in the service sector and ‘white’ English has high prestige in South African society.

What my project highlights, then, is the process of hierarchisation among schools and learners. The empirical study is not meant to be comprehensive, but rather to provide an entry point into key processes at work. For this reason, I chose the bottom and the top of the educational market – that is, formerly black African schools in Umlazi (the vast majority) and formerly white schools (the most prestigious and high performing). I discuss only formerly white schools below. When I first began research on these institutions in 2009, I sought to emphasise their very different trajectories and I developed a typological approach – for instance, noting how some schools raised fees to enhance facilities, whereas others made a huge effort to enrol as many white pupils as possible. As I dug deeper, however, I found that most schools had attempted the same tactics at some stage. The difference was often a matter of degree or success.

Specifically, among formerly white schools, five interconnected changes have occurred. First, schools came to compete for ‘desirable’ students who could increase the prestige of the school – in general these tended to be white, better-off and athletic students. While in the 1990s formerly white schools generally cooperated among themselves, in the 2000s, competition intensified and became increasingly acrimonious.
as schools used bursaries to attract desirable students – sometimes explicitly to ‘poach’ certain students.

Second, desegregation among schools became increasingly uneven. By this I mean that it unfolded very differently across the white schooling system. Some schools enrolled predominantly white students, whereas others admitted a majority of black students. This dynamic was not simply a reflection of the residents who lived near a school. For instance, the upper-middle-class Berea suburb desegregated more quickly than the lower-middle-class Bluff area. However, in terms of the schools, the opposite pattern unfolded. This pattern resulted because white children moved from lower-class areas like the Bluff into schools in Berea, and most black students were kept out and pushed into lower-class white schools.

Third, whiter, more upper-middle-class schools charged higher fees. By 2012, schools in the working-class Bluff area charged on average R10 000 a year, whereas those in the more upper-class Berea charged R30 000.

Fourth, spatially, in the late 1990s and 2000s, formerly white schools significantly increased the scale at which they recruited learners. Whereas in the 1960s it was taken for granted that children would attend their local school, by the early 2000s around half of the school advertisements in south Durban’s free local newspaper Southlands Sun were from schools located outside the newspaper’s distribution area. Some advertisements were from schools as far away as Pietermaritzburg (80 kilometres away). Berea schools began to advertise in the Bluff’s local paper in the 2000s, and Bluff residents also recall seeing posters on lamp posts advertising Berea schools. From the perspective of Berea’s ‘traditional’ schools, the Bluff was no longer a place of undesirable rough-and-tough working-class whites; instead, it was a pool of potential white learners.

Finally, boys’ schools used sports aggressively to promote their status. Though soccer was popular among south Durban’s working-class whites, rugby had long been played in elite schools and was the
accepted national white sport. After apartheid, some schools made huge investments to improve the performance of their rugby teams. From around 2000, a number of rugby scandals erupted across South Africa that ranged from schools poaching rugby players to sports stars faking their ages. One marketing officer at a rugby-centred school told me that his job was created in 2000 and that his duties include travelling as far as Pretoria (more than 500 kilometres away) to ‘buy’ rugby stars. A number of boys’ schools now invest large sums of money in bursaries to attract desirable students; at one sports-focused boys’ secondary school, a teacher told me that 60 per cent of its students had some kind of scholarship. Most of these scholarships were aimed at luring students who are good at sports, notably rugby. Even a referee of schoolboy rugby matches, I was told by the referee’s brother (a teacher I interviewed), was on the payroll of a prominent school; he was paid to look out for talent. Schools with more successful rugby teams have remained notably whiter than other schools: their reputations are of fidelity to whiteness and, related but not equivalent, they enrol a higher proportion of white children.

Conclusions: Thinking with relational comparison

As other chapters in this book show, ‘relational comparison’ works alongside other key concepts that Hart deploys, including multiple trajectories, articulation, populism and translation. In this chapter, however, I stress how Hart developed the relational comparison approach in the context of her empirical work in Java, Malaysia and South Africa. It might seem mundane to note that fieldwork can drive methodological innovations, but one reason this point needs to be made is because of the difficulty many graduate students face today in undertaking long-term fieldwork. As academic jobs have become scarcer, graduate students face intense pressures to become professionalised very early on in their careers – for instance, by writing articles and attending conferences.
As someone with a tenured job, I had the privilege of being able to undertake decade-long fieldwork on schooling in Durban. An established ethnographic approach to studying schools might have involved ethnographic research in a single school or several schools. Given that racial segregation still marks much of the country, this approach could easily be justified. The limitation of this method, however, is that it is unable to fully grasp the dynamic connections between schools and place. Central to my approach was therefore to ‘follow the children’ to show the workings and consequences of the tremendous daily movement of learners in a marketised schooling system. These dynamics have parallels with but also connections to those unfolding elsewhere. In varied ways, most schooling systems around the world have amplified or introduced marketised mechanisms, as a result of which schools have more powers to choose learners and parents to choose schools. To fully understand the way that race, class and other social relations are mutually constituted necessitates a relational approach, rather than one that considers a single school in isolation.

This relational comparison approach to schooling demonstrates how race is never static and always being reworked and sometimes contested. The racial hierarchies that remain today are not a ‘legacy of apartheid’ – to choose a phrase that is commonly evoked to describe South Africa – but actively produced in relation to class and gender and struggles over space. A relational approach to race in fact has a long history that, in some cases, is only now being recognised within mainstream social theory. Cedric Robinson’s *Black Marxism* (2000), discussed in chapter 2, is a unique study of the development of racial hierarchies within Europe, and how these shaped the rise of Atlantic slavery and the black radical tradition. Activists against apartheid themselves influenced and drew from anti-colonial and anti-racist struggles elsewhere on the continent and in the United States, as well as elsewhere. In the contemporary period, Donald Trump’s rise is often studied through an American lens but in a recent essay Hart (2021) challenges American exceptionalism by drawing connections to Hindu nationalism in India.
and populism in South Africa. The strength of the relational comparison approach, as a point of departure rather than a rigid method, is that it encourages researchers to simultaneously focus on everyday situated practices and their relation to forces and contestations taking place in multiple other places.

**NOTE**

1 Statistics in this paragraph are 2011 census data calculated using Supercross software provided by Statistics South Africa.

**REFERENCES**


