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Educating for the Anthropocene

Schooling and Activism in the Face of Slow Violence

By: Peter Sutoris

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DILEMMA 2 REPRESENTING LIMINALITY: TOTAL INSTITUTION OR TOUGH LOVE?

One morning at Durban South Primary, I found the campus deserted. It was a day like any other, with the refinery smokestack throwing up flares and the hipsters, gangsters(?), churchgoers, and other characters milling about, throwing curious looks in my direction across the school fence. It had slipped my mind that the seventh-grade students (whom I was primarily working with) had left for camp that morning, and it seemed there was nothing for me to do. I decided to check Megan's office; as one of the long-term teachers and a department head, she was someone I had been trying to interview for weeks but our schedules never aligned. Fortunately, she was in her office. The quiet of the morning allowed us to speak at length about the challenges facing both students and teachers, about the school's crumbling paper-thin walls, and about just how rough Wentworth was.

What really captured my imagination, however, was not Megan's words but the drawings and photographs on the wall of her office. I was not sure what I was looking at, so I asked her. She paused, let out a quiet sigh, and started telling me a story. "Did Johnny come up in any of your interviews?" Megan asked me. I said he did; I had heard he was one of the notorious troublemakers at Durban South. But Megan was much more interested in cause than effect. "His mother died, his sister has HIV, he . . . I am not sure of his status. His father lives in Chatsworth and he lives with his uncle," she began.¹ Megan was more animated than I had ever seen her; she usually kept to herself and was rarely seen outside her office or the classroom. That morning I was talking to a different Megan.

I learned that Johnny's uncle had three children of his own, all of whom received preferential treatment. Johnny often was blamed for their mischief. If the children complained to their father, Johnny would get "a beating with whatever the uncle has in his hand. And the uncle is a mechanic and Johnny has been hit, I think, with every tool, every tool." The level of detail in this story was remarkable; I had not come across another teacher who knew so much about a child's life outside the school walls. "[Johnny] is a bully of note because that's what he's exposed to, that's how he's treated and that's how he deals with things, 'cause that's how he's dealt with," Megan continued. She spoke next of her colleagues. "Some teachers just won't understand that, they won't accept it, they will not embrace him, they will not say to him, 'You have the potential to do extremely well, come and sit here,' no . . . I've had people come in [and say to me], 'Why do you have that scum on your wall? I just wait for him to leave the school and you still want to put his picture on your wall?'"

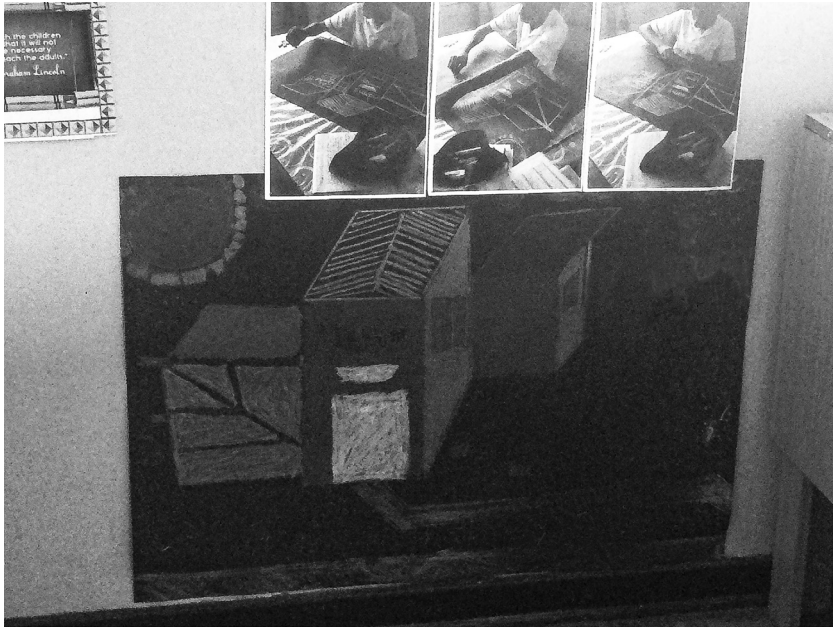
This did not surprise me. I spent a good deal of my time in the field talking to teachers who did not seem to believe their pupils had any curiosity, motivation to learn, nor individual agency. As I reflected on the mosaic of experiences that contributed to my perception of Durban South—the everyday rituals of discipline, listening to shouting and screaming, the normalization of violence against the pupils—in my ethnographic diary I compared the schools to Foucault's (1979) idea of the prison and panoptic society. But there was no denying that such comparisons were driven as much by my visceral reactions to what I was observing around me as they were the product of an intellectual effort to make sense of the field. And while emotional responses do not have to be the enemy of analytical thought, as Ruth Behar (1996) has so beautifully shown in her work on Latin American migrants in the United States, I wondered if the sympathy I felt for the children colored my understanding of their teachers; perhaps I had judged them harshly as a result. After all, both of my key informants—Pranay in Pashulok and Aruna in Wentworth—were highly motivated educators who appeared to care about their students' futures. Could it be that what I was interpreting as a manifestation of an oppressive, (post)colonial education was, at least in part, an expression of tough love? That perhaps these teachers believed, or

even knew, that their methods had the potential to turn things around for these children? Where did the influence of bureaucratization and depoliticization end and caring individual agency begin?

Megan was now telling me how the drawings and photographs came to be on her wall. Johnny's class was due to go on an excursion to the Durban Playhouse, a theater in the city's downtown. But another teacher, Aruna, told him he was not allowed to join because he had "bunked" school the day before. Johnny told her he did not "bunk"; he went to see a doctor. Aruna did not believe him because she had passed by him that day as he was talking to a group of boys. Both stories were apparently true: Johnny met his friends on the way to the doctor and chatted with them before going on, and that is when Aruna saw him. But then he crossed a line: not only was he speaking back to Aruna but he also clicked his tongue at her, a gesture considered very rude. "He's been accused of something he didn't do," Megan said emphatically, "so the agitation of what he's been through at home is coming through as being rude and aggressive. Now you being rude to me, you clicking your tongue at me . . . There are several more things that you have done now in this time than bunking school, so that's not even an issue now, we not even going to talk about that . . . A long story cut short, he wasn't allowed to go and he was crying because he wanted to react, but he couldn't react."

I looked at the picture (see figure) again. It seemed to be of a scene in Wentworth. Above the drawing there were three photographs of Johnny as he made the drawing. The picture showed boxlike houses with flat roofs and narrow streets and a large sun in the sky. The drawing looked like it had been tinkered with, as if parts had been erased, and the house in the center had a peculiarly bright window. There was a rawness to the picture, with its dark colors, large plain areas, and the eerie absence of people. This was no realism and yet it felt very Wentworth-like.

When Megan saw Johnny cry, she asked him to come to her office. "I gave him a piece of paper and some chalk and I got him to draw, and he drew this picture but he had lots of rain coming down, which he later on took away and he—the windows were broken here. It's a shop just down the road, and he had a caption at the bottom, 'Hate this shop, they are thieves.'" When Megan asked why he wrote this, Johnny told her that he once bought



Johny's drawing on Megan's wall.

a loaf of bread at the store, worth R11, and paid for it with a R20 note. The shopkeeper said he did not have change, and Johny was “shoved out.” Ever since, whenever it rains, Johny goes to the shop early in the morning when it is closed, picks up rocks, and breaks the shop window. Megan asked how many times he had done this, and Johny said four or five. She said to him, “You know, it costs them like R80.00 for every window you broke to have it fixed, maybe more than that if they not fixing it on their own. So let’s just say R150.00 times four—that is R600.00. I think you’ve got back your R8.00 that they took and refused to give you, so it’s time to stop doing that now.” Johny said nothing in response, but the next day he came to Megan’s office again and asked to see the picture he made. “He took the white chalk and he cleaned up the windows and he rubbed out his little caption there about them being thieves and rogues and whatever, and he—yeah, he changed the picture and he took away the rain. I said to him, ‘Why you taking away the rain?’ He said, ‘Cause now I look at the shop as not something that I need

to get back at. So I'm not going to wait for it to rain and go and break their windows anymore.”

Apparently all it took for Johny to stop acting out was for a single teacher to offer him a way to tell his story. And, given the lengths to which I had seen teachers at Durban South go to push their students, I wondered if perhaps each of them had a “Johny” tale to tell, if underneath the shouting and verbal abuse, they truly cared. When Megan finished telling me the story, I asked her why she keeps the drawing and the photographs. “To me it symbolizes that there’s hope for him. He has the potential to heal, but he has so much of pain.” The children in Wentworth, she believed, “think that they have nothing to offer you, and they feel very small and inadequate in their capacities, but if our teachers would just open their mindsets to who these children really are, they are—I don’t know, for me, phenomenal. They go through—if you see them dressed for school, you would not believe where they come out of. Where they come from. Little houses with mattresses in the kitchen, no electricity, no hot water, gas, a little gasket that they use for everything.”

I did not have the detailed knowledge about these children’s life circumstances that Megan had accumulated over the years, but my instinct was to empathize with them the best I could and—given the racialized history of South Africa, the colonial legacies of anthropology, and social science at large, and the fact that I am White—steer clear of judgment as much as possible. I nodded as Megan spoke; my dilemma was not whether to agree with her but how to square her words from that morning with the, in my view, harsh practices I witnessed at Durban South day after day. Could the apparent contradiction be due to the cultural lens with which I viewed empathy, a lens that prevented me from seeing these practices for what they truly were—expressions of tough love in the context of a rough township? Or were these words simply a rationalization for problematic practices? Were the teachers agents of an institution or activists in their own right, battling the legacies of apartheid by trying to bring out the best in these children?

The dilemma of choosing between these two interpretations points to a politics of representation fraught with the ethnographer’s inevitably limited understanding of the informants’ social realities. The dilemma, in other

words, was not so much between choosing one interpretation over another as it was in deciding which claims I felt confident enough to include in this ethnography. As the pages of this book attest, the word “felt” in the previous sentence was important in this process because ethnographic confidence is often as emotional as it is intellectual. While it may appear that some of the conclusions I reached about schooling in Pashulok and Wentworth, as presented in chapter 4, were shaped chiefly by my understanding of the histories of these two spaces, the affective politics of delineating ethnographic truths from opinions played an equal part in how I navigated this dilemma. Like Johnny, I kept coming back to what I knew. I did not always accept my informants’ invitations into their realities; but, like Megan, they did often drag me out of my bubble. This made me realize that my interlocutors were citizens of postcolonial, liminal states, which had a profound influence over their worlds. In the next chapter, I examine the histories of these states and their ongoing ideologies and practices that regulated my informants’ lives.

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