

Justice Work In and Out of Justice Itself

DEBBIE SONU

Hunter College, City University of New York

SLAVOJ ZIZEK (2008) BEGINS HIS BOOK “VIOLENCE” with a quaint yet illustrative story about a factory worker accused of stealing. Each and every night after his shift ends, guards convene around him to carefully inspect the contents of his wheelbarrow. Each and every night, nothing of note is ever found. Until one day it is realized, all this time, the worker had been stealing the wheelbarrows.

“Resist the fascination!” implores Zizek. Disentangle from the obvious and immediate present. Lay gaze upon the peripheries and undercurrents, the social realities of the people unheard, and by virtue of radical difference, decenter the central narrative of truth as action and action as truth. While conventions speak of public protests and orchestrated platforms, what becomes of the everyday unnoticed moments that are at once ordinarily mundane yet extraordinary in their own right? What might be gained and what might be lost from a definition of justice more broadened and less visible?

In what follows are three stories of justice untold, even disavowed. To some, they may seem familiar, even uninteresting. But for the high school youth who tell them, they are fierce acts with a veraciousness of their own. They are the stories I failed to hear as a self-assured doctoral student who armed with a swathe of literature forged ahead with a stern belief of what justice must be. At that time, justice work for me was always collective, mission-driven, organized, and loud. It was reactionary, resistant, and rebellious. It moved policy and detested the very systems and structures that historically oppressed the poor and the colored. I expected that for this justice to work, children, alongside their teachers and parents, needed to reclaim their transformative potential, work their historicity, and fight the governmental entities that disenfranchised their communities economically, socially, and politically. The fate of the world rested on the shoulders of our youth, and with a fixed gaze narrowed by the appeal for action, the recipe seemed simple, clean, and promising.

Yet in my short-sidedness, was it possible that I neglected to see the examples of justice that were igniting all around me? Was I disciplined into understanding justice work as defined through terms of consensus and singular identity? Did the discourse of schooling render justice problem-based, evidence-oriented, evaluated, assessed, and collaborative? Instead of centralizing the actor as one who wields justice, what if justice was seen as diffused and everywhere, as a phenomenon to be embodied rather than owned or captured. What if justice was effervescently

waiting just beneath the surface of every human encounter? Justice then may linger elusively. It may even transcend politics, even structure, even agency. It may be an inextricable part of a condition made both unbearable by violence yet enlightened by hope, beauty, and love.

Thus, how can we develop the capacity to recognize the hegemonic aspects of justice as a socialized norm, to detach it from absolute truth and question the structures and institutions that render it a form of constraint? Justice, in its emancipatory potential and degenerative properties, yields myriad dimensions to the human experience. It does not bring people together into singularity, nor is it reciprocally caught in a cycle of debt and credit. Rather, it is already present in the singular, felt by anyone and situated at any moment. Perhaps then, justice work is to do justice when no one is watching, to ignore the commonly held ways in which it is taught as a subject to be achieved. It may even be that once we invite justice as an institutional mandate, it has already become produced through the very rules of order that make it unjust.

Sadie

It's like a school where if you want to help people you come to this school. If you don't want to help people...well, I'm not that friendly when it comes to people. I'm not the type of person that stands around and listens to people's problems.

When I walk into advisory class, I will most assuredly be greeted by Sadie, a garrulous and self-confident tenth grader who aspires to be a lawyer one day. Ah, how appropriate! Her chatter is boisterous and contagious, she argues with amazing confidence, and is well known by Justice High teachers and students for her outspoken personality. She will most likely be laughing; humor being her topmost criteria for friendship. But then again, she once threw over a computer chair in an explosive fit of rage that teetered dangerously toward a physical altercation with another student. Not one to back down, her intensity melts away the refereeing adults and for that moment, everything stands still. But, I believe these episodes are relatively rare for Sadie. Usually, I see her grinning from ear-to-ear, sauntering through the hallway, her short bob haircut, and tall, mature figure.

I was climbing up the winding stairway towards the library room, through the hallways of the adjoining high school, and onto the third floor of the school building. Sadie walked by my side, sometimes lingering behind, peering into open doors and playfully disturbing classrooms already in session. After pleading with the librarian to open the locked door, we entered, finding a cozy nook off to the far right, amid some tall bookshelves and hidden from the central area.

Sitting in undersized school desks more befitting for an elementary than a high school, we faced each other. I began with intent, *So you know I'm doing research in your advisory class and I wanted to get to know about your life and what you think of justice, or what social justice may mean. Does that make sense?*

She nodded without apparent reservation.

If you ever feel like you don't want to be recorded, I laid my right hand on the recorder resting on the faux wood surface, just let me know and I'll turn this off, no problem. Oh, and everything you say is confidential, I won't say anything to anybody, and I'm not here to grade you or anything like that.

She nodded again and blinked her eyes.

So. What do you think of your school here?

She shifted her eyes from one side to the other, folded her arms atop her stomach, and in a clear voice, broke out declaring,

You know, I go to school here because I was tricked by the title. I am not even going to lie. I thought this was a law type of school. Cause it's a school for social justice. I wanted to become a lawyer, that's my goal. But if I go to a school where the only thing they are here for is to help people financially and stuff. Like this school is more like a social worker's school.

If I didn't fall out of my chair then, I surely envisioned it as so. Within a minute, my clear plans to honor Justice High as a flawless example of justice work were immediately annihilated into pale stardust. The dozens of pages of ethnographic documentation that I had collected, created, contrived turned into oblivion, or at its very best, became proof of a theory refuted. As Sadie continued to exhale her disdain for pity, the patronizing service of her teachers and administrators, her stronghold beliefs in individualism and willpower, I sat back bewildered, stark naked and speechless. As teachers spoke, "Passion!" Sadie yelled back, "Patronization!" As teachers said, "Solidarity!" Sadie retorted, "Do it yourself!"

Struck by the startling effect of Sadie's candor and fouled by the realization that I desired to control rather than study, I began again, attending instead to the subjective voices in which the many colliding stories were being told. This rebirth incontrovertibly changed the very notions of justice that I carried so dear to me all those years and I admit now that I feared the magnitude of the reflective work ahead. I feared the unknown, the contradictory. Such an abrupt awakening not only illuminated for me the ethics lost by fraught research but also highlighted the delicate footwork of getting in and out of the way of justice itself, a lesson that would recur in my teaching practice, my scholarship, and in the intimacies of my human relations with others. During the most subtle of times, I would be reminded to take great care, for something so seemingly delicate as justice can very easily turn against itself when we fail to listen.

Cesar

Cesar leans back in his chair, decked in the latest designer kicks, dark baggy jeans, and a white T-shirt ironed to a crisp. There isn't a speck of dust on his shoes and his hair is shiny and held in perfect form. From behind the cuff of his pants, I can peep a glimpse of his socks. They are worn and grey. Behind his narrow, squinty eyes, Cesar is a melee of complex personality traits and dispositions. He has at once a rough and nasty exterior, able at a moment's notice to turn a pleasant conversation into combative and spiteful battleground. Yet he is also loving and wounded, dependent on the opinions of others, bound to the burdens of leaving an impression.

It had been no more than 15 minutes since his arrival into advisory when all of a sudden, Cesar declares, *I'm outta here*. He saunters toward the exit, performs a quick stretch as if he'd just awakened from bed, and flings the metal door with such force it slams violently into the back wall and bounces back to chase him out. Cesar finds his bearing and his bread in school corridors. His wide stride carries a hint of arrogance, followed by the scent of cologne, which is then followed by flirtatious kisses on the cheeks of shy smiling girls. He pounds fists and nudges handshakes with the boys till he is tardy for class but for Cesar there are things more pressing than being on time.

He walks directly across the hallway into the counselor's office but not before he is stopped by a security guard who scolds him for wearing a hat and threatens him with confiscation. Cesar knows he is breaking the rules and has been waiting for this response. He has never been keen to the protection of the NYPD who have a soiled reputation in his community. Police officers are stationed at almost every entry point in the school building and they monitor the elaborate system of metal detectors and surveillance cameras which is to blame for increased tardiness and the long lines that sometimes leave the children outside standing in the rain.

There's police stopping people, hittin' people for no reason. Like Sean Bell, I think that's like police brutality, how they're shootin and they don't stop to even see the person down, they just keep shootin and shootin, describes Cesar about the disparate treatment of Black and Latino males in contrast to their more affluent and White counterparts. He continues on about this racial divide, *If you're a White cop, you're always going to look at that person wrong because of the past. And it's happening right now too. Like right now, you never know, right now, there's somebody probably gettin' beatin' up or whatever just cause they're Black or Puerto Rican or whatever.*

With no one in the office, he finds a seat to wile away the remaining 30-minutes of his class period. Nobody tells him otherwise or questions his presence. This is not what he had hoped for.

Cesar is a 15-year old teenager who has laid witness to some of the most deleterious games of the adult world: alcoholism, domestic violence, police brutality, poverty. He plays childlike to the appropriate rebellion that gives rise in the high school social scene yet is at once able to theorize upon injustice and inequity with the sophistication of a layman's Frankfurt School. He knows the workings of systemic racism and class privilege and speaks eloquently on political marginalization, the absurdity of hyper-materialism, and the myth of American meritocracy. He has no reservations about sharing his homelessness, his dysfunctional family, his estranged father, his weed-smoking, all of which I believe he uses to his reputational advantage. But in the end, he would much rather boast about his latest gadget, his clothes, his shoes, his gold-paved future, Puerto Rico, and hip hop. Justice for Cesar is about making enough money to leave the hood. One must be able to take care of one's own, he says. Materialism is the most logical way of closing the economic gap between rich and poor.

Cesar intrigues me. He reminds me of myself. From our very first encounter, I find myself wanting to see him more. But he rarely attends school and when he does he splits his time between the counselor's office and the hallway.

As I leave my classroom observation, I catch sight of him and take moment to sit down and chat. *Why aren't you in advisory?* I ask without expectation. He keeps his demeanor light and shows little interest in advisory.

Last night in a fit of rage Cesar knocked his mother's boyfriend out, laid him sprawled out on the living room floor. *He deserved it, talking to my moms like that.* He fears he will be sent back to live with his dad in Florida. The aches of his father's strict discipline flash into his mind as he says under his breathe, *I hate Florida. I'd rather move to Puerto Rico.* To break the tense air, he laughs out loud a peculiar and awkward laugh.

I listen with strange familiarity to his stories about his mother's endless fights with her boyfriend and release my furrowed brow when I hear he is staying at his grandmother's house three subway stops east. There was a stint during the semester where Cesar described himself as homeless, drinking fifths of vodka with the boys at random makeshift parties in the

neighborhood. As he speaks, he throws up swear words without inhibition; I understand his anger. I have never thought shit to be a filler word. Ever since he returned from his winter break visiting his dad in Florida, Cesar has become restless and frustrated with his home life here in Brooklyn. The constant yelling has finally built up to an unbearable intensity and his patience has collapsed.

Like flint striking steel, collisions that give birth to action are akin to fire, stoked by circumstance, set within particulars, and kept alit by deliberate energies. They can over-consume and destroy, while at the same time, generate and strengthen. They can also be fleeting, momentary, and forgotten. Yet, all are illuminating and in that vein, all are potentially educative.

Release yourself Cesar and seek, no, seize the freedom to emancipate yourself within that condition you find unjust, unwarranted, and unfair. How dare I tell you what your justice may be? I have seen you take the power that has been stolen from your very being. You throw it right back into the system that tells you to be kind unto others while it leaves you alone and hurting. In your living room, justice manifested as clenched fists readied in defense of the weaker less physically comparable and likewise through the daily material hustle upon which wings you hope to escape this place. In school, you are given the freedom of choice but only on the condition that you make the right choice, on condition that you will really not use it. Here, in your own home and on your own streets, you face the open wounds of your mother and refuse to stand idly by. Although, by some measure your choice to protect her may be considered violent or illegal, it may also be considered just and heroic. I was once that child, I can hear you. This is your justice work.

Asia

Um, well, I don't really know what social justice means...no one's ever asked me that before. Asia shrugs her shoulders then turns to one side as a small crease forms across her forehead. She wears a purple turtleneck sweater the exact same color as her glasses and picks incessantly at her lips which are chapped by the wintry wind on the city streets outside.

No one's ever asked her that before, I thought in disbelief. How could this be? Alongside a hundred other tenth graders, Asia enrolled in Justice High as part of a third cohort of students after the school's conversion from a struggling institution notorious for drugs and violence into a small learning community dedicated to issues of social justice and activism. Social justice was a term strewn throughout coursework and advisory projects; it graced the hallway murals and seeped into curriculum design and professional development meetings. Perhaps the phrasing of the question was obstructive.

Well, can you tell me about a time when you saw social justice at your school?

She sat in silence. I winced at another bout of terrible phrasing. She wrung her hands nervously and squirmed. I thought about the strategy of 'wait time.' As we stared hypnotically into the circulating pins of the tape recorder, she suddenly admitted her inadequacy at answering the question. Internally conflicted with how to create an identity impressive to our circumstance, Asia admitted that she would only speak in appropriate formality, or as she described it, *English without slang or swearing*. I was hoping to honor the language that was most connected to her lived experiences and I felt disheartened by her need for propriety. Thinking of Gloria Anzaldúa (1999), I knew that to criticize and control language is to devalue identity in the most injurious way and I began to see how Asia's fickle negotiation was making her performances difficult to

manage. As she divided her colloquial self from that which she believed was revered in academic circles, I realized that my aim to ‘capture voice’ would be perforated by her compromises and that what she decided to articulate would never be separated from the appearances she was so desperately attempting to give.

Certainly, Asia’s paralysis may be indicative of many other issues related to qualitative research: an older, university-based, Asian female sitting interrogating a young, Black teen from a low-income sector in Brooklyn; the tragic denunciation of youth existence and their social marginalization within society; the oppressive formalities of the interview setting; the official commands of educational evaluation; the need to please and be accepted by the other; the desire to reinvent oneself as something trustworthy. But I had never seen her in this way. I didn’t think she cared about these sorts of things.

Usually, Asia works the public gaze and saunters down the corridor with a swaggered out bravado. With a façade of confidence, she will come into advisory class unhurried by the security guards and dramatically fall into her seat, moaning in exaggerated inconvenience as if the mere act of sitting in school was a chore. Her participation in wrestling and sports is her deliberate attempt to diffuse any outward appearance of femininity and I always admired her ability to openly and honestly meet her fluid sense of gender and sexuality, particularly at the vulnerable age of 15. On a typical day, she is casual and easy with others in the room until, in what seems sudden and irrational, she leaps out of her seat with a viciousness that shoots straight through her spine.

You don’t know anything, she’ll remark sharply to whoever seems available. *Shut up!* she will follow, abrasive and jabbing. She is picking another fight and loses herself in a fit of rude laughter that positions the teacher as nothing more than an irrelevant onlooker. Teacher authority can do little during times like these. She is pushing buttons, testing the limits of her audience, watching them through a shifty side glance.

Asia came to Justice High late in the school year, a move made by her mother after some undisclosed difficulties at her last school. Six months after her first day in advisory, she is transferred again, this time into another advisory class for reasons unbeknownst to me or her former teacher. Although Asia seems irritated by her mother’s command, she also seems powerless and resigned to the decision. When asked about it, she simply smiles and shrugs her shoulders.

At first thought, the claim that justice was never discussed with Asia is not entirely distinct from the many social values and traditions instituted without agreement or participation. We are quite literally birthed into a social order of ethics and etiquette that impresses upon our material body a certain kind of rationalized behavior. These social mores evolve, in their banality, without conscious thought and over time become indubitably impulsive and instinctual. It is the subtlety at which they become inscribed that obscures the potential for their critique and reflection. Sometimes we forget that emancipation has a regulatory component; that freedom necessitates structure; that the right to be different is counteracted by everything that makes us the same. It is the double bind. Here, justice as participatory has forgotten the participation of Asia and instead has become a sophisticated schooling structure into which individuals are integrated and thus renewed and reshaped. Justice then has governing power. It is inherently limiting and imposing. The task is to be careful as to how justice becomes an integral part of the institutional apparatus by decentralizing it as a law of truth and being mindful of its totalizing power.

Just after the school bell rings a cacophony of voices interrupts our interview and it is time to end. I click off the recorder and begin to tuck my protocols into an oversized bag. I was beginning to think the interview yielded nothing of substance when one of Asia's characteristic smiles began to spread across her face. I asked her where she was heading. She replied with a hint of satisfaction, *I don't have to go to my English class today. I got a meeting with the principal.*

Instead of heading to her fifth period class, Asia would be meeting with two other classmates and a group of administrators to discuss plans for the newly established Justice High Gay/Straight Alliance, a nation-wide student-led activist organization established to create safe and welcoming environments for students regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

You don't think that has anything to do with social justice? I asked her.

As her purple-rimmed glasses slipped off the bridge of her nose, she responded nonchalantly, *Naw, it's just something we're doing.*

Origins

In a literal sense, these are stories of justice work as they occur in and out of schools and as named and told by youth themselves. Even though they come to life within apartment living rooms, inside classroom walls, outside on Brooklyn sidewalks, the origin of these stories begin way before their emergence in the lives of Sadie, Cesar, and Asia. They are rooted in deeper histories of transcendental worlds fraught with worry and need and brought forth with a deliberation that is not accidental, but rather situated in their own place and time. It is this condition that serves as the complicated social backdrop from which justice and injustice play a fundamental role.

On an existential level, these stories are also about justice work in and out of justice itself, meaning that the collective assumptions we carry about what constitutes justice -- as visual, imaginary, or reductive -- does an injustice to the myriad of other times when individuals face their fears and fight for what they believe is morally right. Many of these stories fall outside mass protests and televised speeches. They may be external to well-designed curriculum and social action projects and because of this, they are sometimes thought of as extraneous, irrelevant, or unimportant. They may even be considered punishable or transgressive. They may not be planned in advance or even have a definitive purpose. Yet, these stories speak back to the delicacy of moral universals and exercise upon them the irrevocable peculiarities of circumstance. They show that honoring justice may require one to completely ignore justice itself, to step out of justice and just work.

Perhaps, Asia's inability to articulate a definition may be the necessary opening to imagine the possibilities of justice work outside the confines of justice itself. Rather than recite the trained vocabulary, Asia decides on ambiguity, even ignorance, against the circulating consensus of a justice defined. It may be that we were both looking too directly at justice as an object to be held that we both failed to recognize her as an exercise of embodied personhood against an evolving backdrop of pain, love, tragedy, and hope. When one necessitates justice, it may appear in many different forms with many different functions.

Asia's story is one of many that served to topple my notion of justice from the objective pedestal upon which it sat. For years, I was an activist. In many ways, I still am. In 1996 during undergraduate studies at UC Berkeley, I lobbied fiercely for the passing of Proposition 215, the

medical marijuana legislation that would make California the first state in the country to legalize cannabis. As an elementary school teacher in East Los Angeles, fellow teachers and I protested and stopped the induction of a standardized bilingual curriculum that we knew was haphazardly implemented and pedagogically obstructive. My teaching was approached with a mission to cultivate young activists in the world and thus large chunks of curricular time were spent examining Cesar Chavez and conducting oral histories of local community leaders and educators. In this way, I had to believe that my work as a teacher mattered, that is was effective and promising. I carried this into my doctoral studies which began during a time when the language of social justice education was flooding out of the academic literature and as mentioned, I wanted my work to contribute gratefully and almost by any means necessary.

Albeit naïve, at that time I argued with great sincerity that *vis a vis* curriculum, the right kind of schooling with the right kind of approach would produce a world more compassionate and alive. Perhaps, I still do. Had I not, I would have left the field years ago. However, like the wheelbarrow inspectors from the anecdote above, I searched through the contents of this dream and in essence forgot the frailty of teaching and empirical research. I documented with meticulous detail the proof of my theory and proselytized from behind the glare of a computer screen. I forgot to observe the world that was unfolding right before my eyes.

It is true that these stories, just as justice itself, are inflected by an abysmal economic system and corroded by racial prejudice. The students at Justice High School are from one the most disadvantaged neighborhoods in Brooklyn, New York. Yet their stories are also windows into the courage high school youth exhibit as they navigate their lives from vantage point adults will never understand. I do not wish to romanticize the stories here, that in and of itself, is another, if not the worst form of injustice. But I remain grateful for their presence during a time when my empirical dishonesty was beginning to feel disconcerting and in their telling, I hope to include them into the body of work we consider to be of the justice-orientation.

What I came to realize is that narrow definitions of justice cancel the very dimension of the other and what emerges is what Slavoj Žižek (2008) terms a fetishist avowal, an “I know, but I don’t want to know that I know, so I don’t know” (p. 32). This sort of denial carries itself forward into ideological horizons, imprinting itself in the current trend of popular antics and techniques, moved by collective meanings and inscribed with mimicked practice. As I sought to applaud Justice High as an exemplar of social justice education, I diminished complication by framing it through sweeping generalizations and in effect marginalized the very beings I hoped to bring forward. There was cowardliness in my institutional loyalty and ideological shortsightedness. When loyalties are set forth in this way, the consequences of actions are not fully assumed. They become absorbed and diffused into the systemic order and one does not have to take responsibility for anything because the ideas were never theirs to begin with. When the popularity of new trends begins to wane, when words such as ‘innovation’ ‘the times’ ‘the way it is’ become refashioned into descriptors of a new idea, there is a perpetual exit and that is replacement. If we continue to serve ideological fads, instead of connecting to the lives of individuals, then we can leave our ideas when they do not serve our current purpose. In a socially provincial life, overly-concentrated to the point of narrow-mindedness, the self-affirming person then becomes their own best lover and the notion at hand becomes an unrequited love. Their passion becomes masturbatory; a negation of the other is produced; they are focused to the point of disillusionment.

This is my origin story. I have likened it to a crippling paralysis that shook and seized with the rhythm of youth counterstories, a half-written dissertation that lay limp and unrecognizable

for months, a tragic death that gave rise to a rebirth of sorts, resurrected with a visionary scope much wider and inclusionary than previously understood. Justice then, for its socializing aspect, is realized to be both wholly generative and also exclusionary and marginalizing. It can inspire great solidarity while producing feelings of otherness, inadequacy, and even oppression. Due to its ethereal nature, there might not be a definitive moment for justice, even in the face of tribulation, and to speak of justice as here or there or not here or not there would contradict the theory that justice lives everywhere. Maybe then we are always faced with its possibility and for those who dare to seize it and exercise its power, justice may strike, as it does in living rooms hushed by television static, sparked within crowded subway cars that roar through dingy tiled tunnels, whispered in library nooks and echoing through raucous cafeteria halls. The justice of which I speak may not move policy or take down Capitol Hill. But what is real is the courage that balls up in the clenches of a heaving chest at the moment justice appears. This feeling of standing tall will resonate with a ferocity that is undeniable no matter what the perceived impact may be.

Lessons

If universals are irreconcilable to the particulars of experience, does, should, and can an institutional agenda for justice education be settled against the plural realities of a justice more personal and intimate? Is there, as Richard Rorty (1999) suggests, a distinction between private and public spaces that render imagination and order as respectively separate activities? It is in the private, he says, where idiosyncrasy and creativity reign, where rules are contested by experience and hope. The public, he says, is a different space. It is for social interaction, for ensuring a degree of security, to maintain compliance to an order bent on function and progress. Schools, as public institutions may have a different role than that taught and understood in the private. It may be more about definition than a private world of justice will tolerate. We must then be careful in the public eye, cognizant of its rendering and careful of its colonizing effect. Perhaps we must be defenders of that which dwells in the private corners of imagination.

This origin story is one located at the interstices of a gnawing betrayal and a desire to prove. It sat on the edges of a private and quiet alliance with youth and my public responsibility to evidence a documented rule. Perhaps it should be acknowledged as so. Schools teach action as order. It may be in its very nature. The prerogative of teaching, then, should aim to increase sensitivity and responsiveness to a wide and diverse array of justices, without judgment on the theoretical sophistication of youth or the political direction of their enactments. Schools that drive justice work through institutional mandate and performance-based evaluation may not be able to flourish within the possibilities of a justice already borne, one that appears through the particulars of our experiences and the eccentricity of our actions.

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