

Unguessed Gestures in Effective Institutions: Poetry's Threats to Urban Schooling

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WHEN SAM BURTS INTO MY ENGLISH CLASSROOM TO PERFORM HER POETRY, to perform for the students I love and from whose love I swell, I feel suddenly reified in my role as classroom teacher—a role that becomes apparent in relation to our guest: the small, Asian Teaching Artist who arrives in tight jeans and stylish, high-heeled boots on this blindingly sunny afternoon. I look down at my sensible pants and orthopedic clogs. It is the last period of the day, and I am deep in my element with my students, proud of our carefully curated classroom with its sprawling Word Wall, glittering bulletin board boasting their work, crates brimming with writing journals, and the “Do Now” scrawled across the just-washed blackboard. The need to show off a respectful community weighs upon my shoulders in the presence of this visitor. *See? My students are well behaved. They respect me, so they'll respect you. They love me, so they'll be good to you.* Their bodies show this, seated straight-backed in rows and wide-eyed in neatly pressed uniforms. And now that this woman named Poet rears her head, shakes her hair loosely and lets the “soft animal of her body” (Oliver, 1986) perform, the waning poet in me observes the person I have become: effective English teacher, validated by discipline, immune to violence, and committed to her students. Something in me sinks as I watch this bright, new body in my room.

Towards a theory of unguessed gesture

Sam, the Teaching Artist who visited my 10th grade English classroom, made me painfully aware of an irreconcilable tension between my movements (physical, curricular, conceptual) as an “effective” English teacher and the work of poetry—in this case, represented by the Teaching Artist. In her presence I noticed a particular vitality of movement that felt lost to me at the cost of mastering the role of “teacher¹” in the context of this “urban” (read: poor, minority) school. Through an exploration of Teaching Artist roles and perspectives, I try to come closer to an articulation of these different movements (those of school and those of poetry) and what they might reveal about the “structures of feeling” (Raymond Williams cited by Berlant, 2011) of schools, or clear senses of the present moment that constitute teaching and learning in the United States.

I play with English teacher and Teaching Artist subject positions as a way to expose possible tensions between poetry and schooling, or, to draw from Jacques Ranciere (2010), between *politics* as aesthetics and *policing* as a way of maintaining everyday common sense structures and discourses particular to education today. By focusing on the Teaching Artist, “an artist for whom teaching is a part of professional practice” (Rabkin and Hedberg, 2011, p.7), I hope to bring into sharper relief the a/effective elements that constitute a recognizable assemblage named “school.” In this study, Teaching Artist perspectives are treated as fresh lenses through which to see the intensities marking the everyday workings of urban school classrooms. These perspectives also invite the reader to consider poetry as a potential disruption with curricular implications to the aimed movements of schools: a linear and targeted effort to achieve “success” most intensely projected onto “urban” bodies.

The Teaching Artist moves nomadically from school to school, leaving behind a bound anthology of student voices. As an institutionally untethered subject in constant transit between schools, but also between the discourses and missions of education and of art/poetry, the Teaching Artist jumps from residency to residency. She belongs to a school only ephemerally and intervenes in the English classroom as a guest “poet” for a short spurt of time, sometimes returning to the school the following year and other times disappearing. Perhaps she can momentarily disrupt the effective grammars of schools as part of her power lies in being the school’s mistress and never a dutiful wife.

Inspired by the Teaching Artist’s nomadic subject position, which, according to Rosi Braidotti (2011), enables healthy skepticism and critical consciousness, I engage poetry-teaching Teaching Artist perspectives as a way of critically seeing and aesthetically re-sensing schools. An affective sense of poetry as enigmatic, felt-electric and moving through irreproducible precision rouses my exploration of the Teaching Artist who enters a school from an outside organization in order to supplement what the classroom teacher presumably can(not) teach. Brought together, the reflections of poetry-teaching Teaching Artists and my own teaching memories in both roles (Teaching Artist and English teacher) contribute to a theory of “unguessed gesture,” extending from Agamben (2000), as a movement that “neither makes nor acts” (p.51) and thereby complicates and/or disturbs the sensible structures of schools.

That particular afternoon in my English classroom, Sam appeared to embody such a gesture, as no one could be certain where her performance was going, nor did her words appear to be going anywhere or doing anything beyond the sensations they sustained across the surface of the room. As a gesture in which “nothing is being produced or acted, but rather something is being endured and supported” (Agamben, 2000, p.56), her “lesson”—if it could be called that—moved as a middle, as an unreconciled process, and, as such, felt alien to the aimed movements that configured the classroom of which I was a sanctioned member. Lauren Berlant (2011) describes Agamben’s gesture as a “medial act, neither ends- nor means-oriented, a sign of being in the world, in the middle of the world, a sign of sociality” (p.199). This Teaching Artist seemed to sustain this between-state, creating a time and space different from the end-oriented movement of schooling and predetermined (or “guessed”) nature of curriculum. Her poetic engagement with the students made an opening for unpredictable situations, words, and responses to (not) transpire—a gap potentially disruptive to the moves that constitute a recognizable and reproducible assemblage named “school.” In a way, she posed a threat to everything stable that I had worked to construct in accordance with school norms; meanwhile, she made visible the untraceable intensities that I often noticed erupting in class but usually tried to control or assimilate into “teachable moments.”

Contextual objectives

I consider poetry's possible threats to schooling in the context of today's Common Core State Standards, which centralize "informational texts" in the classroom and push out curricular space for literature—let alone moments to sustain unproductive intensities. Tangled within this context lives the harsh reality of today's segregated U.S. school system (Resmovits, 2014) in which racially isolated charter schools that zealously operate discourses of standards, accountability, and discipline, intervene in a public system to "close the achievement gap" through corporate models of success not much different (though arguably more intense) from those reproduced by urban public schools. Oftentimes, black and Hispanic students come to embody the conditions of schools that more often than not inscribe and dispossess them as criminals in need of management and entangled in failure (Fine & Ruglis, 2009); relatedly, under the increasing pressures of a national curriculum founded on high-stakes testing, standardization, and quantifiably measurable assessments, urban schools tend to dispossess their students from aesthetic opportunities to re-invent what counts as knowledge and to intellectually push against common sense models of thinking (Pinar, 2012). This kind of creative-intellectual dispossession manifests through policing practices that shield against politics/aesthetics (Ranciere, 2010) as modes of re-sensing and challenging the given in surprising ways. Rather than encourage students to linger within, question, and subvert what counts as common sense, charter and public schools often push students to adopt institutional values, absorb predetermined knowledge, and follow a standard road to "achievement." In this context, there seems to be little, if any, room for gesture as an unproductive, undirected state of suspension.

Given the rather un-poetic values embodied by the U.S. school system—values entangled with discourses of core standards and accountability (Taubman, 2009)—it is not too surprising that the teaching of poetryⁱⁱ is largely marginalized and stigmatized within this system. The Teaching Artist/Poet is brought into a school to supplement this creative drought and to engage students temporarily in an aesthetic process that the teacher hopes will instill and/or develop a love for writing useful to broader ELA practices. Of course there are plenty of times in which English teachers themselves are poets in a classroom, moments in which young poets emerge during science class, in the cafeteria, or on school bathroom stalls; my intention is not to provide a definitive conception of "poet," nor to attach that emergence or presence of poetry solely to the professional work of the Teaching Artist. It does seem to be the case though that, given school values, many teachers have little time for poetry unless it is being used as a tool to increase test scores or to help with the writing of the much-valued persuasive essay. It is within this context that schools summon the temporary presence of a different teaching body that cannot belong to the school but that the school may desire for a range of reasons. The Teaching Artist, potentially offering the classroom an injection from an airier outside, can offer added dimensions and/or interruptions to common senses of schooling as well as incite new possibilities for future curricula to come—curricula necessarily unknown in their (be)comings.

Method

Through creative engagements with semi-structured and informal interviews that I conducted with nine Teaching Artists individually, mostly from Teachers & Writers Collaborative but also from DreamYard and Louder Arts, who teach poetry (both "page" and "spoken word" poetry—a distinction that warrants its own interrogation) in various K-12 schools throughout New York City, I attempt to gauge a sense of the Teaching Artist and loosely map the

intensities particular to Teaching Artist work in English classrooms. I use these interviews to consider embodiments of “poet” and “teacher” in schools and to re-view schools through an elusive patchwork of memories, both personal and recounted to me by various Teaching Artists. The memories described erupting between the self, the subject of poetry, the poet’s relation to the classroom teacher, and senses of the schools visited, form this paper’s “findings.”

Teachers & Writers Collaborative’s Writers Directory lists 57 writers, 34 of whom teach the genre of poetry (including spoken word and performance poetry). Based on the T&W Education Director’s insights into which writers are actively involved with T&W and have a good amount of experience working as Teaching Artists, I sent out an initial email requesting interviews to thirteen poets, and I ended up interviewing nine teaching poets: seven from T&W and two working for similar organizations. The research participants’ ages ranged from 32 – 72 and included an African-American male, an African-American female, two Hispanic females, four white females, and one white male. The location of our meetings was up to the participants; we met at T&W’s office, spoke on the phone, over Skype, at their home, or at a neighborhood café.

In the process of listening to and transcribing the recorded interviews, I recognized convergences and divergences among participants regarding certain issues and themes: school atmosphere, senses of professionalism in relation to poetry, the power of language, the pleasures and pains of teaching, and feelings of identification as a teacher, artist, and/or student. My process of analysis involved negotiating what I found desirable to hear with what I resisted hearing. I highlighted the words and phrases that generated in me visceral responses and returned to them, seeking and losing connections. Eventually, I organized the highlighted sections into categories that set up the structure for my findings. In the process of poetically playing with my data, however, I ended up disrupting that structure.

Rather than aim for conclusions about Teaching Poet perceptions and motives, this study intends to provide a texture, or, in the words of Eve Sedgwick (2003), “an array of perceptual data that includes repetition, but whose degree of organization hovers just below the level of shape and structure” (p.16) that offers a sense of what it might mean to engage in an urban English classroom as a Teaching Artist. I intend for this study’s texture to ignite further explorations of the relationships between poetry’s work as gesture and the directed, progress-driven movements of urban public schools. To do this, I turn the inevitably already-interpreted data (Scott, 1991) these interviews offer into poetic re-interpretations, or affective fragments, inspired by Kathleen Stewart’s (2007) *Ordinary Affects*, which offers an assemblage of disconnected scenes “to create a contact zone for analysis” (p.5). I invite the reader to newly feel and analyze these (un)familiar school scenes through too-close readings of this text.

Attempting to move away from efforts in research to “represent” the subject, I intentionally intervene in the interview data in ways that make impossible a “valid” representation of my participants’ words. In some cases, I offer their words verbatim—playing only with line break; in other cases, I fuse my participants’ words with my own to form new assemblages. Sometimes I focus on the dynamic between researcher and informant, inserting my presence more explicitly in the scene of participant descriptions as a way of showing some of the scaffolds of the interview process. The choices arise from an aesthetic impulse—one that I believe I share with my research subjects, all poets—to form some kind of felt, dis/mis-orienting moving bond between myself, informants, and, reader and, in some way, to allow for those subject distinctions to momentarily dissolve. I want the fragments themselves to move nomadically from participant to participant, to question dominant constructions of “teacher” and

“poet,” and to poke at the sensible of what constitutes an academic article. They are meant as gestures that support my participants’ viewpoints and mediated experiences without commenting on those viewpoints or experiences.

**Daily grind
ghazalⁱⁱⁱ
in which the couplets bleed together**

after Philip W. Jackson

What do you expect to see today? A too certain erection? You won’t be let down: today, as any other day: a pencil. When we reach the new grade, we find old bulletin boards, attendance rolls, books, a sharpener harkening a pencil. The bell rings at 8:27am. Welcome, students of Algebra, English, Biology & History—Did you remember to bring a pencil? If you struggle in math, recall the rules of the game: Write a long path to arrive at your wrong answer. Make a string of equations on loose leaf with a pencil. When Ms. Manners stammers, “How did you get that number? I can’t follow your train of thought,” just point to the page. They won’t fail you if proof comes from a pencil. And the day you find yourself drawing on the smooth back of a desk, don’t cry when Mr. Crane shames you in class. At least you still have your pencil. Oh student, now you’re using the tools of the school to write wild words. Danger! No page can resist the shrill tip of a pencil.

Becoming-teacher

Before Gregory bubbled in letters randomly on his standardized test as I watched in horror, before he wrapped a sweatshirt around his head and ran around the room shouting, “*I’m a terrorist!*”, before he snuggled beside my mother the day she visited and asked her to read him a book, before he found out I was Jewish and pressed me about Hitler, chanting his name twelve times and goading his classmates to join him in chorus, before we went fishing together in Prospect Park, before he pulled his own eyes slant in the presence of an Asian visitor and shouted “*Chimi-chong-chong!*,” before Ronald pushed him inside a closet, before the Dean grabbed his arm to accuse him of ejaculating on the kindergarten student’s glitter drawing of a square, before I spilled hot water on my hand and it bubbled pink for weeks, before all this, I spoke with his grandmother who made me a promise: “Don’t you worry, Ms. Pindyck. I’ll beat him. I’ll beat him.”

The air is just thick all the time

The air is just thick all the time, but nobody seems to notice. The ghetto heat in this building seems as natural as the American Flag flapping limply outside. The teachers and students are used to it by now, but the self-proclaimed Latina who walks in from outside wonders if she could survive it all day long. There’s some ghetto heat in her apartment building, but it’s not this bad. She believes the language in the classroom is part of the air. The language feels stagnant—rubric language—words resistant to dips, jolts, and swerves, the stuff of poetry. The woman recoils from that rubric language, *forever* recoiled from it, long before she became an educator and a writer. She sees herself less in the classroom teacher and more in one student’s long braid flipped sideways. As she introduces herself to the students to whom she has been brought to teach poetry she notices the classroom teacher frowning in the corner. Suddenly she

sees how the teacher must see her: correctional officer mandated by administrators to police and train the teacher. Modeling and training assume the same position in this school. The woman can feel a sharp riff wedged between them. She wants to shake and hug the teacher like she would her sister. *Look, I'm not here to train you—I promise! I'm here to be myself.* But why should the teacher believe her? Look at this place. Beige paint peels from the wall. An “Accountable Talk” stem sticks to the door. All the windows stay clamped shut.

She leans into the screen after putting her three kids to bed

Behind her, a newspaper moon
hangs framed on an orange wall. A child
flashes behind her. Does she notice?
She uncoils and recoils her Princess Leia buns.
Poetry is what will get you laid! She starts
reciting Shakespeare—the words trill
fast & sultry: hummingbirds
making fast waves: *Being your slave*
what should I do but tend upon the hours & times
of your desire I have no precious time at all to spend—

Professional dipytch

i. The thin white man with sparkling eyes refuses the name I give him: Professional Poet. He corrects me: “You mean people *identify* as poets.” He shifts in his seat and stirs his cappuccino, recalling a memory from his work years ago as a Teaching Artist. Today, past seventy years of age, he has numerous publications and awards for his own poetry and books on the teaching of poetry. What many use to bolster themselves on a pedestal he sees as poison in the classroom. Instead of carrying the name “Poet,” like a priest, he preferred to be seen as a weird guy from nowhere. Only an odd creature from the ether, not a Poet, can get students to write poetry. A strange stranger can get fresh flames rolling on paper. So he would ask the classroom teacher to please *not* introduce him as a poet. And he would begin his lesson by sharing with the students some wild dream he had. As we talk, his eyes flash brighter with each memory of practical exercises that sparked some word fire in the students and in the classroom teacher. They dim slightly when I speak of theory or systems or subjectivities. “I’d be happier if you ask me about practice,” he says. “I’m a poet and not an educator or a theorist.”

ii. Dressed in smart pants and a blazer, Maria strides into the room with her long hair pulled back in a clip. She acts like she belongs here. She *does* belong here. She arrives at her first planning meeting with a packet of materials for the English teacher, and she speaks the language of the school. She knows all about the mandated standards, rubrics, and classroom routines. She fears being read as a dilettantish, “fru-fru” poet who sits around all day penning words on paper and dreaming up illusions. No. Maria is a professional in a professional setting. The teachers respect her for that. She has a schedule, she knows what it’s like to grade 200 papers, she has copies of lesson plans, handouts, and samples of her own poetry with her contact information printed and ready to go. She wants the teachers to see themselves in her—to trust that she won’t come in and make something up off the top of her head. They’re getting a professional here: a poet no different from a teacher: a poet who can blend into any institution: a poet attuned to the cultural backgrounds of her students and the community she enters. Respect.

Temporary mermaid

I seduce them. I get the kids
to like me. I totally—like,
look what I wear to teach! I have fishnets on!
I—I go in—
a show. I have to seduce
these kids. You know, I have my hair
up in these tight buns, and there's one
day they're wicked pissing me off,
so I take my hair down.
I tell them I'm this totally awesome mermaid
and I'm gonna go back to the ocean
and I'm never gonna go back to that classroom
and Thursday's really gonna stink if they don't
do what I say. If they don't do what I say
it's just gonna be some boring thing.

The change

For the past five years, Rachel has worked as a visiting writer at the same school in the Bronx. They've given her the title Writer-in-Residence, and she feels like a part of the school community. When an English teacher position opens up, a friend at the school encourages her to apply for it. What could be better? With this new job she'll get health benefits, a *much* better salary, and she can work at a school she already knows and loves—a school where she can continue to just be her “authentic” self. Rachel also admits that she has felt envy towards classroom teachers for the deep relationships they have with their students. She yearns for that special closeness.

She gets hired as an 8th grade English teacher, but on her first day in her new role, something shatters. The kids want discipline and authority from their teacher. They want a mean character. It's a different relationship from the one she's used to. As a teacher, Rachel gets stomped on, spat on, and broken. Her students throw chairs and knock over desks. She can barely breathe. Two weeks later she starts taking Xanax. What happened? A simple shift in roles, a change in title, an accumulation of responsibilities, and the branch snaps?

Her doctor grows worried and advises Rachel to stop teaching. She accepts his suggestion and resigns mid-year, asking the principal to please return to her former role as Writer-in-Residence. She wants to connect with the students again as an artist. An artist, she decides, is allowed to see students as human beings without buying into an authoritarian model. She clutches that identity more tightly than ever, as her pale, raw hands redden.

Flip the script

See that's the thing with poets // We have the ability to flip the script any time // We're used to word games // We made words our friends // Ya know? So we can always // Flip it // I'm comin' from the black point of view // I say our very survival depends on us flipping the script // White man called us nigga // Low life term, something less than human, something despicable, something to not hold in high esteem, and we // Turned it around because of *sound* // Sound is always the mother of words // We made “nigga” sound sweet // We can say “nigga” and make you think it's something you wanna be yourself // *Say, Man, that's a baaaad nigga!* // *Yo, when*

you dunk that ball—look at that nigga! Oh, I loooooove that niggaaaa! // We can say it in a way that takes the sting out if it // That’s a poetic experience: when you take something that’s really crappy and make it sound like it has value

Diary scrap, or one teacher’s squirming memory

Lenore reads her “poem”—emotional vomit, terrible—her heart splatters the page—silence—the poem presents itself as sacred—a house inviting *whoever you are, whatever you want to say*—suddenly D&A laugh their stupid boy laughs—I can’t stop them—I make dagger eyes—about to stand—Ariana lightening-leaps from her seat—“You shut the fuck up!”—*Thank you, Ariana—yes—all eyes on me—Lenore, go on—*

Thalia

The girl with the yellow leggings who will one day grow to be a woman finds herself in her older self’s memory slumped behind a school desk. It will take twenty years before anyone ever says to her, *Oooh what you wrote is really nice. It sounds really poetic.* Her way with words slips beneath school’s gaze even though she loves words more than anything. Why can’t the teacher see her? It’s like she doesn’t count if she can’t pass a test or write a proper essay. Out the window she notices a cardinal perched on a telephone wire. How long has it been there? It looks like it’s watching her, at least for a second—then it leaps off, zooming to a different wire—short attention span. When the girl is older, fully grown into her dark and lanky body, she’ll embrace all the identities she wants: poet, performer, model, actress, playwright, musician, educator, Pied Piper, free spirit. At that age her eyes will hurt from the glare of neon lights in the office we share. She will ask me to turn off the lights, which remind her of school lights, as she squints through lashes drooping with mascara. Her hair will be wrapped in a pink polyester scarf. She will have a terrible headache. But right now she’s an eight-year-old girl, trying to make her mark in a pre-drawn room. Even at that age she can feel the school trying to etch her into a sleek silence she’ll dare to talk back at—and teach back at—years later.

Form

Indians always did art
as an adjunct to what they were doing in their life—

it wasn’t just to hang on the wall, it was
to use, to wear, etc. We got away from that.

Art becomes this sacred, separate thing.
That’s what happened to poetry,

too. Poetry is special—
you’ve got all these teachers saying,

“I hate poetry.” That gets me furious.
It’s in the frick’n curriculum—

*Who cares if you like it or not? That’s boring!
You’re supposed to teach it, so learn to like it!*

Even the superintendent once told me
she hates poetry. I'm thinking, *How can you say that?!*

I teach form.
We got away from form in the 60s and 70s

when everybody was OK and wonderful—
we lost the ability to discern.

I won't let the kids rhyme at first.
I tell them rhyming is too hard,

it's easy to lose the poem in the rhyme.
You have to have respect for children.

If you give them everything,
you don't have respect for them.

***Lord of the flies* repurposed as one strand from one woman's mouth**

There are so many teachers that I work with who are really ready to kill some kids—
they're—and, I, through poetry, I get those teachers to love those kids.

My lord

He calls me *My Lord*.
Ducks to place his comb inside his afro
& rests his cheek against the desk.
He curls into a ball, cackling
at the silence of his peers. *My Lord!*
He sits up straight—*Is there a Bill of Wrongs?*

Teacherness

The teacher encased in teacherness needs an injection. The man tries to transfer it to her, to infect her with the lifeblood that she can then turn into her own kind of electric nectar. If she sticks out her tongue, or her arm, or her wing, and takes it, she might find a new power in herself. Breaking out of teacherness is like breaking out of a frozen hive where the honey crystals have flattened and all the bees play dead until some kind of heat dares spring. The man's been there too before—dead to himself, like the sleeping teen on the G train, or the lamp-zapped moth stuck to some flickering bulb. He recognizes the injection as a transfer that can stain blue and beautiful like a cyanotype print. That's all. A passing from one body to another. But first you need to know that you have it to give, and in the giving—the passing—the thing itself must change in relation to its new body. There can be no replication.

Rachel remembers

these kids who were little assholes in my class when their parents were there it was like a different story and I would say *well you know Danielle did de-de-de-de-* and her mom was like *WHAT?!* and then the sad part of that is that I know she's going to get home and get beaten [you know what I mean?] but then part of me felt like *Good* [you know?] It was almost like that level of like I was like not good that she's gonna get beat but I'm glad that someone's gonna discipline her like I'm glad that's she's—but then what am I teaching her [you know?] it's like that

I don't know any

I don't know any Teaching Artist that goes into a classroom not extremely serious. Even if it's the funniest poem they've ever taught. They're serious about why poetry matters, why language and vocabulary—*figurative language, figuring language*—matters. Lang—if they're not afraid of language, they can break open everything else. I started writing around the 7th and 8th grade, poetry—I have some very dark poems that I wrote in a Monet journal. It was beautiful and lovely. *Ahhh my love is gone...*

Letter to movement: Post-performance after-affects

Dear movement, pulsing in each curriculum, each worm, each president, impress upon us the e/affects of the suppositions embedded—embodied—in the place from which each one of us “begins” to move. Your imperceptible nature throws the curriculum for a loop. In what ways might the unproductive, impractical movements of teachers and students rouse a curriculum based on something not yet established? In all our multivariant, un-unified realities, what unguessed senses of “we”—marked palimpsests of histories, memories, languages, and cultures—emerge as gestures? Un-aimed movement, disorienting streak—O—no thing at once, hummed clear of all things, in which you are the uneven circle drawn black on Rosaspina. Make sure the room has been considered. And the basket rim, and the rice cake, and the salivating mouth.

Residual ring

When I applied to take a year off from teaching to pursue an arts fellowship focusing on writing poetry, the Department of Education sent me a letter stating that the fellowship had nothing to do with my professional development as an English teacher. Shortly after, I sent my principal an email quoting Langston Hughes' “What happens to a dream deferred?” in an effort to articulate my need to resign. What many might deem foolishly romantic felt to me like a visceral absence knocking at my chest. I did not mention in the email that my four years working as an English teacher coincided with the development of a hardened body, an authoritative subjectivity, nervous twitches, and a belief that teaching success is largely a matter of control. My body carried the effects of a school system to which it belonged for four years—by which it was shaped and in compliance with which it moved—but it also held those affects that returned my body to my students and colleagues each day: the unbearable love that swelled, pumped, and tore open my heart at sudden moments. I miss most those coveted textures bordering the curriculum: moments lingering in the intensity of feeling, not knowing what might—

Conclusion

“Conclusion” fails as a fitting title for this final section, as nothing has been concluded, and the questions I began with have only intensified in the process of trying to “make sense” of poetry's connection to the role of the Teaching Artist in relation to the sensible configuration of

schools. However, it appears that the role of the Teaching Artist lives in constant and necessary tension with the subjects, discourses, and atmospheres constituting U.S. schools today. Also, it seems poetry moves in such a way that compels Teaching Artists to uphold its gesture as they continue to negotiate the particular dynamics of the multiple classrooms in which they fleetingly reside. Most of the Teaching Artists I interviewed see the classroom teachers they have worked with as creative, brilliant, and bound by institutional pressures and expectations.

Ineffective, as far as school values and structures are concerned, poetry—or what Robert Frost famously called “the shortest emotional distance between two points” (Richardson, 1994, pp.521–522) and what Adrienne Rich (1993) claims can “restore numbed zones to feeling, recharge desire” (p.xiv)—may threaten the linear movements and discourses of progress upon which urban schools are based by making a different kind of time and space for language to glide and offshoot. Poetry is not a message; like Agamben’s gesture, it is “a shift that could turn into a disturbance” (Berlant, 2011, p.198). Through the medium of words, poetry tries to figure into language what can never be neatly figured out, or statically configured, while offering unanticipated word assemblages with visceral vibrations. Poetry sustains a momentary intensity in such a way that cannot be put into any other words nor formatted into a reproducible script, lesson, or curriculum. One might say that poetry’s work is antithetical to the purpose of school as an effective institution of learning aimed at “success”—a purpose most intensely projected onto “urban” bodies.

Despite the so-called freedom of Teaching Artist work, many Teaching Artists vacillate between the pleasures and pains of this nomadic subjectivity that positions them outside-in any given classroom, as well as between senses professionalism in the context of schools. These contradictory feelings seem intricately woven into Teaching Artist experiences, but they also point to a more widespread fear of what Janet Miller (2005) acknowledges as a “segmented self” (p.70) that constantly fails the Enlightenment-based ideal of a coherent autobiographical “I” continuing to (re)present experiences as real, fully knowable entities. In some way, the roving movements of the Teaching Artist who enters the school system as a continual guest disrupt this humanist desire to fully be—and know—a rooted and unified identity.

Similarly, a curriculum can move in a wriggling way, wrestling with established identities and embracing whatever possibilities emerge in the relational processes of becoming. A curriculum that values the affective movement of poetry, that embraces the impractical and unproductive openings made by gesture, that refuses to reproduce accepted models of knowledge, and that dares to intervene in formatted spaces in order to reassemble and re-form sensibilities, may find itself in tension with those “structures of feeling” recognized as urban schools. Agamben’s gesture offers educators a cue, as its state of suspension makes better visible the targeted movements of schools and how those movements intensify in relation to “urban” bodies. An analysis of this sense of gesture begs asking why members of urban schools are so forcefully intertwined with linear, “productive,” progress-driven movements while more privileged bodies (read: rich, white) are abundantly offered impractical, unproductive opportunities to creatively and intellectually explore, and potentially disrupt, a given state of things.

A curriculum made for and by a school can shift the very form that contains it by offering its lacquered cracks and windows to nomadic visitors, artists, winds, and ways. The role of the Teaching Artist, though by no means a “solution” to curricular problems, suggests an opening for sustained affective intensities to rupture a fixed order of things. Even if a rupture fails to “redistribute the sensible” (Ranciere, 2010), a curriculum mobilized by such a desire is already in a better position to shift school moves and re-form its subjects in unknown ways. Also, the

impractical, unproductive nature of a curriculum-as-gesture may require a serious rethinking of what it is we want our students—and *which* students—to produce and why, what knowledges we continue to deem valuable to whom, what unknowns live as terrifying possibilities in the classroom, and what kinds of practices might allow for unforeseeable gaps to slip past our controls, potentially seeding wildflowers and wayward tremors of ginger root.

Note

ⁱ The first moment that signaled to me my success as a white English teacher at an all-minority school was a conversation with a student early on that suggested I had somehow overcome my whiteness; this student pulled me aside to ask if I would be returning the following year. When I told him that I would, he responded, “Oh good, because you know how to talk to us, and most white teachers don’t know how to talk to us.” I read this comment as an affirmation that I learned the language and cultural attitudes of my students (Delpit, 1995), and that I had become, proudly, less white in the process. However, I can’t shake off the feeling that part of my success in reaching my students in a culturally relevant way was intricately linked with the role of disciplining black tongues and bodies reproduced by the school system to which I belonged.

ⁱⁱ That said, the subject of poetry, like any subject in school, has particular uses aligned with the ideologies, discourses, and values of the system to which schools belong—uses that may or may not prove antithetical to poetry’s moving and affective work.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/poetic-form-ghazal>

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