

In the Spirit of Ubuntu

Stories of Teaching and Research

Diane M. Caracciolo and Anne M. Mungai (Eds.)
Foreword by Ngugi wa Thiong'o



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In the Spirit of Ubuntu

TRANSGRESSIONS: CULTURAL STUDIES AND EDUCATION

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Scope

Cultural studies provides an analytical toolbox for both making sense of educational practice and extending the insights of educational professionals into their labors. In this context *Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education* provides a collection of books in the domain that specify this assertion. Crafted for an audience of teachers, teacher educators, scholars and students of cultural studies and others interested in cultural studies and pedagogy, the series documents both the possibilities of and the controversies surrounding the intersection of cultural studies and education. The editors and the authors of this series do not assume that the interaction of cultural studies and education devalues other types of knowledge and analytical forms. Rather the intersection of these knowledge disciplines offers a rejuvenating, optimistic, and positive perspective on education and educational institutions. Some might describe its contribution as democratic, emancipatory, and transformative. The editors and authors maintain that cultural studies helps free educators from sterile, monolithic analyses that have for too long undermined efforts to think of educational practices by providing other words, new languages, and fresh metaphors. Operating in an interdisciplinary cosmos, *Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education* is dedicated to exploring the ways cultural studies enhances the study and practice of education. With this in mind the series focuses in a non-exclusive way on popular culture as well as other dimensions of cultural studies including social theory, social justice and positionality, cultural dimensions of technological innovation, new media and media literacy, new forms of oppression emerging in an electronic hyperreality, and postcolonial global concerns. With these concerns in mind cultural studies scholars often argue that the realm of popular culture is the most powerful educational force in contemporary culture. Indeed, in the twenty-first century this pedagogical dynamic is sweeping through the entire world. Educators, they believe, must understand these emerging realities in order to gain an important voice in the pedagogical conversation.

Without an understanding of cultural pedagogy's (education that takes place outside of formal schooling) role in the shaping of individual identity—youth identity in particular—the role educators play in the lives of their students will continue to fade. Why do so many of our students feel that life is incomprehensible and devoid of meaning? What does it mean, teachers wonder, when young people are unable to describe their moods, their affective affiliation to the society around them. Meanings provided young people by mainstream institutions often do little to help them deal with their affective complexity, their difficulty negotiating the rift between meaning and affect. School knowledge and educational expectations seem as anachronistic as a ditto machine, not that learning ways of rational thought and making sense of the world are unimportant.

But school knowledge and educational expectations often have little to offer students about making sense of the way they feel, the way their affective lives are shaped. In no way do we argue that analysis of the production of youth in an electronic mediated world demands some “touchy-feely” educational superficiality. What is needed in this context is a rigorous analysis of the interrelationship between pedagogy, popular culture, meaning making, and youth subjectivity. In an era marked by youth depression, violence, and suicide such insights become extremely important, even life saving. Pessimism about the future is the common sense of many contemporary youth with its concomitant feeling that no one can make a difference.

If affective production can be shaped to reflect these perspectives, then it can be reshaped to lay the groundwork for optimism, passionate commitment, and transformative educational and political activity. In these ways cultural studies adds a dimension to the work of education unfilled by any other sub-discipline. This is what *transgressions: cultural studies and education* seeks to produce—literature on these issues that makes a difference. It seeks to publish studies that help those who work with young people, those individuals involved in the disciplines that study children and youth, and young people themselves improve their lives in these bizarre times.

In the Spirit of Ubuntu
Stories of Teaching and Research

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DALENE M. SWANSON

WHERE HAVE ALL THE FISHES GONE?

Living Ubuntu as an Ethics of Research and Pedagogical Engagement

In the Spirit of Joseph

Deeply disappointed, I stood looking at the gate, chained and bolted closed. There was a fine stillness that threaded itself diaphanously through the soft zephyr of early afternoon, like the breath of dissipated anticipation. The red brick school building stood there empty and alone as if mocking my memory of the happenings within it some years prior. I could discern the dappled shadows of the past behind the veil of an existent manifestation of reality. I could feel the sunlit-afternoon ghosts of that present intruding on the past,¹ trying to trick my consciousness, attempting to reconstitute history and replace it with current phantasms of a vacant school and post-apartheid South Africa, like simulacra, as if they were the new 'real'. The background white noise of nearby traffic and the faint lull of waves against the barnacled pier in the nearby harbour seemed, for a moment, to pause, and the audience of my consciousness hushed as if some premier performance was about to begin....

I had been very excited to revisit this school, one of the schools in which I had engaged in my doctoral research² all those years ago and in which I had dreamed, wished, aimed to go back and give back for so long now. Even a quick visit would suffice, at least for now. And here I was, finally standing in front of the main entrance of the school, and it was empty! The whole school was steeped in the silence of absence. My word-thoughts of what I had wanted to say when I greeted him again, the principal of this school that I had admired so much, and to the teachers and the people and the humanity within the community herein, were now lying as splintered shards of discarded possibility on the ground, and the fragments disintegrated and seeped into the red dust like playful demons of failed intent.

There was a nation-wide public sector strike on. I knew that many schools had closed their doors in sympathy and in safety to their community. Teachers were striking too. There had been strike action when I had engaged in my research in this region of South Africa years ago, but it had not really impacted these schools in this bay. Nor had the historic fishing village with her mixed-race community been directly affected at that time. Now, I was in the country for such a short ten days before I had to move on and return to Canada. I'd hoped beyond hope that there would at least be some staff present that I'd known before in the school, characters that I'd written into my narratives. Even if the school were closed for

classes, perhaps they would still be there bustling about. I played with the mental images of the faces from my narratives, from my past lived experiences, hoping for them to come alive and become re-embodied in the flesh outside of the words.

As I drove my hired car up the same unchanged winding roads towards the school, I wondered what their reaction would be to seeing me again after so many years. While the possibility of disappointment dampened the sense of excitement, hope, and anticipation of seeing the people of this schooling community again, my thoughts were primarily focused on an existential question of consciousness: What would it be like?

But...there were just ghosts for me.³ Just the remains of objects of past activities marking in similitude where happenings might have occurred, of phantom events within school buildings, along pathways, behind closed doors, closed meshed windows, closed metal gates, bolted and chained: just the remains of memories; the remains of the day before me; and with it, the shattering disappointment of lost opportunity to fill the substance of that space.

Only the haunting caw of a seagull as it flies (fore) shadowingly overhead breaks the silence that has pervaded this static moment, as it also signals a change of scene. It is as if the seagull is heralding some new emergence, reminding me to be ready and open to receive new messages, to expect a visitation, to recognize a harbinger of sorts, and to stand as internuncial witness.⁴ As I stay standing, longer than I needed to, trying to capture a sense of past presence and place, grasping at an illusory real, I am aware that I am in fact waiting for something, something to happen. I stand still in front of this school as if in expectant anticipation of the unexpected...and as I do so, he enters from the left.

“Goeie middag, mevrou! Kan ek mevrou miskien help met iets?”⁵ I turn to look at him perplexed. I had not seen him appearing from the wings into the vision of this scene of absent presence. He is wearing the blue overalls that designate workmen and workwomen in South Africa, but in contradiction to this class referent, he is carrying a black leather report folder under his one arm. His face is wrinkled with years of sunburn and his hair shows hints of grey. He smiles, turning his head to one side deferentially, and I see his mixed-race heritage with the signs of Khoi-San descent in his facial structure. I extend my hand to shake his, and I reply to his greeting: “Goeie middag, meneer! Ek wou kom kuier. Ek was lank gelede hier.”⁶

He nods his head as I explain that a few years back I had come home from Canada to engage in my doctoral research in this school and two others in the vicinity (Swanson, 2004). He sees the resignation in my face and responds sympathetically, with an “ag, shame, mevrou,”⁷ as I explain my reason for being here at this moment. I tell him that I had come back for a conference and a quick visit to South Africa, and had hoped to visit the school, the principal and teachers that I had befriended here before. I knew that the students would be new and that the other students I’d known would have passed on to other things and left the school by now, but I had hoped to visit with some of the school community members that might still be ‘holding the fort’, so to speak. He laughs with me over my last comment. He nods with understanding and compassion in his eyes,

recognizing my disappointment as if it were his own. He sighs and drops his eyes to the ground as if to think about this situation a little longer and afford it the quiet gravity of this moment. We both look at the ground where my thought words had disappeared, and there is a moment of silence again. The breeze stirs little dust balls on the ground and about his dusty workman shoes, sturdy with large laces, that have been worn well with several years of walking in this community. We stand and are both thoughtful.

Choosing the appropriate moment to speak again, he lifts his eyes with the intentness of issuing important words. Converting to English, probably because he had heard that I was now living in Canada and my Afrikaans was less than fluent, or because he recognized that I spoke it with the accent of an English speaker, he tells me that he remembers the principal and teachers speaking about me, “the South African teacher from Canada,” and how they had spoken so highly of me. “Ja, for a long time,”⁸ he says, with an accent on ‘time’ to give it importance and with another nod of the head.

This compliment comes across most sincerely, but I also understand it in the cultural parlance of graciousness that I remembered as being so prevalent within this fishing community, their heart-felt politeness, their sensitivity to the feelings of others, their careful deference and bestowing of honour on people they deeply respected. Speaking slowly, which, from my perspective, is a cultural code borne from humility and intended to give each word the weight of meaning and respect it was intended to bear, he says: “I wasn’t here at the school at the time, but I came to be more involved with the school soon after you left, and they used to speak of you, and you left a good impression. They would be very disappointed to know that they missed you today. Ag, siestog! What a shame! I am sorry!”⁹

I reply with a gracious ‘thank you’ and tell him what an honour it had been to be welcomed into this community, that I often thought of the people I had come to know in the community and wished them all well, and that I had been very grateful for the opportunity to engage in research and with such a wonderful community. I explained my gratitude for the gift of their wisdom and hospitality, and that I looked forward to meeting them all again. And then as if we both simultaneously realize that we had not formally introduced ourselves, we exchange names with a “nice to meet you” at the end of the greeting.

It is then that he begins to share his story. At the time, I was not prepared for what was to come. I was still caught up with my own disappointment, but as he spoke in deliberate and carefully formed words, I soon realized that I was again being given something very precious. My senses initiated a shift of consciousness that opened me to humbly receiving what was to be one of the most sacred gifts of humanity I could ever have been given, the sharing of an important narrative, the telling of a precious life story, full of reverberating meanings and wisdoms that that telling entails.

“I am Joseph Hendriks,¹⁰ that same Joseph Hendriks that was in all the newspapers. I am the one,” he says with a hint of pride, and realizing that I probably have no idea of what he is talking about as I would not have had access to local provincial papers in Canada, he continues:

I am the caretaker at this school, but on Sunday's I am the community pastor. Over the last few years I have become increasingly involved with the school, because I am concerned about our youth here. I pray for them on Sundays and I try to take care of them during the week. I support our teachers and principal because I know what hard jobs they have here in this community and the difficulty with our youth. It is because of our youth that it happened. They tried to get rid of me because I was speaking up for our youth.

I look perplexed at his last statement and he continues his narration carefully and slowly, undeterred:

You see, the skollies¹¹ and the drug dealers, they are damaging our youth, corrupting them and ruining their lives before they have a chance for anything in life, and I was trying to stop them. Because I was close to the kids in the school, I could see what was going on, and I was telling the police, and they didn't like me as an informant, the drug lords that come into our community. They come here because our community is poor and our kids are so vulnerable. There are no prospects for them because there is no fish in the harbour. No fish! Where have all the fishes gone? They have been plundered, the big boats come from elsewhere, and the fishermen have ransacked the seas, so there are no fish. They did not stop until the fish were all gone. And as you know, this is a fishing village that has grown around this harbour. It has been our way of life for many, many decades.

He stops to clear his throat then continues, meticulous in his explanation:

So the fathers of the kids, they have no work. There is terribly high unemployment and the fathers just lie about and drink, and so the alcoholism is very bad. So the kids get neglected. And then we have other social problems here, the violence with the gangs, and domestic violence and rape.

Resonating with the despairing discourse the principal had deployed all those years back during my doctoral research in relating the conditions of the community, he continues to explain with a sigh:

There is lots of it. It is very bad. The kids have no prospects and there is not much hope of getting a job or doing better than their parents, so they get involved with drugs. And for the drug dealers, this is easy money because there are so many kids they can get their hands on. So our community suffers and we can't get out of this vicious cycle. We are dependent on the fish. The fish is our hope and there is no fish.

He turns for a moment towards the harbour and looks wistfully at the sea beyond the school as if imagining a harbour brimming with fish and a community 'saved' and 'healed' by the emergence of prospect, hope and possibility. But reality intrudes; it is a messianic wish, and he turns back and continues:

That is why they plotted to get me, those skollie drug dealers, because I tried to stop them and I kept on telling the police. So they tricked me. One day, I

was driving in my old car and at the stop street, a car pulls up next to me and a youngster turns down the window and asks me if I am the pastor, and I say “yes,” and he says he has good, cheap parts for my car and I must follow him and he will take me to the place where I can get the parts cheap-cheap. I followed him because I thought they were being kind to me because I was the pastor and next thing I am on a lonely road towards one of the beaches here and the youngster stops the car. As he does so, three men jump into my car and hold a gun at my head and tell me to drive. They tell me where to go and the next thing we are driving towards The Strand.¹² They hold the gun below the level of the window and tell me not to try any tricks. I try to flick my lights and drive onto the wrong side of the road to get the attention of passing cars, but they threaten me that they will kill me if I try that again.

He stops for a moment to fidget with his report folder then tucks it back under his arm. The sun is hot and I can feel the sweat running down my back. He must feel it too and he takes out a handkerchief to mop his face:

Then at a place that is very remote they make me stop along the road and they force me out of the car and shove me in the boot,¹³ and then they drive again, and I know they are driving towards The Strand.

He pauses again and I imagine that the flood of memories of the situation he was in, of his own fear, must be difficult to relive and retell. But he continues, intent on his story:

I prayed. I cannot tell you how much I prayed in the boot of my car, because I knew what they were going to do with me. I lay there in the dark and I prayed, and I knew I must try to do something before it was too late. And you know, The Lord was with me because I decided to flip the boot open, but I just happened to do it at exactly the time when the car came to a stop at an intersection, and because of that, I managed to jump out and I ran and I ran as fast as I could. They tried to come after me and they were shouting and shooting but they did not get me, and I managed to get away. I ran through the dunes and just kept on running. I’ve never run so fast in my life. I was covered in white sand like a ghost but I kept on running until I eventually got to a roadside store. I went in there and the people helped me phone the police and they came right away. They sent out a squad to look for the skollies but they could not find them, and they took me home and made sure I was safe with my family. It was a terrible thing and the whole community was badly shocked. Everyone was in fear, but they were very supportive and ready to protect me. Everyone was very kind and they were very concerned about the skollies coming back to murder me. And one day I get a phone call and I am asked to meet a man down by the docks, so I go down there and he tells me that he was told to tell me that they did that because I was telling on them to the police and they wanted me dead as a result.

So I kept very low for about a month or so, and I said nothing and I did not go many places, and I just kept a low profile. You know, I was scared for my

life. It did not feel good having to look behind your back every moment, worrying about the safety of your family, imagining every moment when you hear a sound, that they are coming to get you.... It was not good.

I was trying to take in the full horror of his story, and for a moment I tried to imagine his situation. The breeze stirred again and it was like warm breath on my clammy face, but my sweat turned cold down my neck. I made a comment about how sorry I was and how awful it must have been. The story was shocking! The afternoon turned, and shifting his feet and tucking his report folder under the other arm, he again continues:

You know, I could not live like that. For a while I kept low, but I realized that this was not the way. I could not keep on living like that in fear and that I wasn't helping anyone. So I changed my approach. I started to get out into the community again. I spoke up for our youth in church again. And I realized that working against the drug dealers like that wasn't the right way. It wasn't going to work. So I actually approached them. I arranged to meet with them and I invited them to talk with me. I showed them I wasn't afraid and that I had changed my approach. And many of them agreed to speak with me, and slowly I befriended them and asked them, "Please, look what you are doing to our youth! You are destroying these young people's lives. This is not right!" And I appealed to them to please change their ways, and some of them came over to the right side, and they stopped their drug dealings with the youth here. Some of them even came to our church. So now I am back in the community and I continue to help our youth. Recently we started a job training centre for the unemployed youth here to try to find them other work because there is no fish. I am praying it will help a lot. I pray for our youth everyday.

It is often difficult to grasp the full impact of a narration and to understand what has been given, the preciousness of the gift. From disappointment, I was given an unexpected offering of learning. He gave me so many gifts of wisdom, the meanings from this tale and from their telling unfold in layers and across time. The telling offers moments of insight and sagacity in each pondering and remembering, in each epiphany it evokes, and in each recasting of the narration in my mind and spiritual communion with it. Like a textured coat of many colours, the story holds multiple understandings of ways of knowing and being that we can only be humbled by its generative living power.

This Joseph, like his biblical counterpart, forgives his brothers that sell him off. He, like his counterpart, wears a coat of many colours, but he has given this as a gift of himself to his community and through the telling of his story. The interrelated lessons of this tale are many and each holds importance and position in how we engage with our lives, of its purpose, of education, of approaches to community engagement and research, of society, ideology, justice, and our earth. It gives us more than any of this. It gives us hope.

One of the foremost lessons I gained from Joseph's story and which, for me, is manifest in daily other revelations, is the understanding of how social justice

cannot be slathered off from the larger ecological concerns that impact issues of poverty, opportunity and cultural epistemic access and affirmation. They work together as a whole, and like other binaries of Western thought, their separation is ideologically problematic. The particular and the universal, the local and the global require being understood as multi-articulate, reciprocal, concomitant and intermeshed. The subjugation of people, their way of life, their knowledge systems and wisdoms, their socio-economic, political and cultural aspirations, are part of a broader global historical discourse of subjugation that marks the land and people in localized ways through geographies of difference, and it enacts its violence across time and space. “Where are all the fishes gone?”¹⁴ Joseph asks, delineating the relationship between the devastation of the seas, the denial of a community’s livelihood and historical way of life, and the drug addiction and despair suffered by the youth of this community.

Just as holism and a larger vision of humanity and ecology as being ever-interrelated¹⁵ is nurtured back into life through Joseph’s story, so the appreciation of that which Joseph was expressing in his actions of care, compassion, forgiveness, and an expansive inclusivity, was, in fact, Ubuntu. His encompassing sense of humanity and his great generosity of spirit bore these out. His capacity to transcend personal fear and self-interest, to overcome the limitations of an oppressive context and step aside of the mocking shadows of despair, was the life and spirit of Ubuntu. It was with Ubuntu in his heart that he had the courage to approach the drug dealers, those who would have him murdered, and win them over. It was a show of Ubuntu that he succeeded. It was (with) Ubuntu that he gave back to his community and to the care for its youth. He *modelled* Ubuntu for these youth. It was with Ubuntu that he shared his story with me, and he gave Ubuntu in its telling and in the lessons I received from the giving. Joseph’s story was the spiritual *gift* of Ubuntu.

Ubuntu: An African Philosophy of Being

I come to an understanding of Ubuntu through lived experiences, having grown up in apartheid South Africa. I attended university there during the height of the liberation struggle, witnessed the release of Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, and with fellow South Africans and others around the world, I celebrated the transition of my country of birth to democracy. I became aware of the concept of Ubuntu from an early age. My mother, who spoke conversational Zulu and who had experienced close relationships with Zulu people since birth, was careful to expose me to the responsibilities, contributions and consciousnesses of citizenship and community in an African context. I experienced Ubuntu, first hand, through love and friendship with Xhosa, Zulu and Sotho South Africans, and other Southern Africans I knew, and was often welcomed into indigenous communities. Nevertheless, I was *also* acutely aware of the difficulty and near impossibility of achieving Ubuntu in many contexts of segregated South Africa, as well as *my* role and responsibility as being collectively implicated in this as a white South African (Swanson, 2006; 2007a; 2007b).

While an ongoing project of ‘nation building’ draws on the political aspirations of a strong, united South Africa, renewed and healed from a divided and ruptured

past, it highlights the challenge of incorporating Ubuntu as a pan-political philosophy of engagement, not only operating in the interstices of human relationships but at the institutional, structural and national levels, a somewhat utopian endeavour (Swanson, 2007a; Marx, 2002). Nevertheless, Ubuntu as a guiding principle for nation-building in South Africa serves as a signifier of commitment to a collectivist program of healing, redress and forgiveness, as has been exemplified in the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC)* mandate (see Tutu, 1999; Battle, 1997), even if this has been critiqued as being via a glorified and imagined past (Marx, 2002).

Nobel Prize laureate, Archbishop Desmond Mpilo Tutu, who, in 1995, became the chairman of post-apartheid South Africa's *TRC*, was a strong advocate of Ubuntu. For Tutu, the spiritual power of Ubuntu humanism served as an important platform for providing rules of engagement in TRC hearings. The ethos and tone of proceedings were critically important to the hearings in order to enable, in an ethical manner, the recovery of "truth" through narratives of atrocities from the apartheid era. These terms of engagement were also necessary in the subsequent processes of *forgiveness*, reconciliation, transcendence, and healing that arise, cathartically, through the humbling process of truth-telling.

As I have grown to understand the concept, Ubuntu is borne out of the philosophy that *community strength* comes of *community support*, and that dignity and identity are achieved through mutualism, empathy, generosity and community commitment. The adage that 'it takes a village to raise a child' is an African wisdom borne from an understanding and way of being aligned with the spirit and intent of Ubuntu. The obsessive Western focus on individualism and the continued colonization of African indigenous peoples through the new forms of global capitalism have served to diminish the importance of African collectivist humanism and Ubuntu as a philosophical and communal way of life. The increasing verticularity of Western dominant norms over indigenous wisdoms and perspectives has, through the modernistic project and the dominance of Western-interested techno-centricism, subjugated such knowledge forms and undermined their resurgence (see Swanson, 2007b).

In the South African context, just as apartheid threatened to erode this traditional African way of life – although in some instances it ironically strengthened it through galvanizing collectivist support and creating solidarity amongst the oppressed—so increasing industrialization, urbanization and neo-colonial globalization, threatens to do the same.

South Africa's ready embrace of global capitalism and globalizing neo-liberalism, post-democracy, has set back the project of Africanisation. The global project of progressivism set the course for South Africa in its desire to be competitive on the global stage and significantly participate in global affairs. This came at a cost. At the time when South Africa came out of isolation and was welcomed back into the international arena, a new wave of imperializing capitalism disallowed the possibility of community healing and restoration by preventing the "insurrection of subjugated knowledges" (Foucault, 1980, p. 80) of the Southern African peoples and an abandonment of "a historical knowledge of struggles" (ibid., p. 83) and its earlier

politico-ideological purposes. This has been despite Thabo Mbeki's initiative, as previous President of South Africa, to engender an African Renaissance, whose said purpose is to assist in 'ending poverty and oppression' and to 'regain dignity' for all South Africans. In this sense, incompatible ideologies have resulted in contradiction and fragmentation rather than the unification ideals of nation-building. Ubuntu is a victim of this incommensurateness and rupture. It struggles for recognition, realization and legitimacy within (indigenous) communities, and against misappropriation and complete subjugation on a national, political and institutional level. But, to appreciate the complexity of this, we need to understand Ubuntu more fully as an important historical thread of Africanist knowledge systems. It is to be appreciated as the salt of much of African philosophy, an African way of life, and as a norm and value within African community contexts.

Ubuntu is short for an isiXhosa proverb in Southern Africa, *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*; a person is a person through their relationship to others. Ubuntu is recognized as the African philosophy of humanism, linking the individual to a collective of 'brotherhood' or 'sisterhood'. It makes a foundational contribution to indigenous 'ways of knowing and being'. With differing historical emphasis and (re)contextualization over time and place, it is considered a spiritual way of being in the broader socio-political context of Southern Africa. This approach is not only an expression of a spiritual philosophy in its theological and theoretical sense, but as an expression of daily living. In my own work (Swanson, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007a, 2007b), I have spoken of it in terms of a 'humble togetherness.' For Tutu, Ubuntu is a way of knowing that fosters a journey towards 'becoming human' (Vanier, 1998) or 'which renders us human' (Tutu, 1999), or, in its collectivist sense, a greater humanity that transcends alterity of any form (ibid.).

This 'transcendence of alterity', as I understand it, is not the collapsing of difference in the sense of ignoring the social and political effects of power that 'difference' and discourses on difference constitute in daily lived realities within communities across the world, where the arbitrary nature of constructed 'difference' enacted on diverse geographies of the body are made to appear 'normal' and 'real.' Instead, it is a conscious attempt to reverse these effects in bringing together an understanding of the common investment of humanity as being inextricably bound up together, in 'a bundle of life' (Tutu, 1999), whose pleasure and pain, survival and demise, recognition and subjugation, are all part of a common responsibility, a trans-phenomenon of collectivist concern for earth and other. In recognition of an interconnectivity with the land and all of Earth's citizens, a disposition in consonance with Ubuntu would mean becoming receptive to others and other ways, while offering a generosity of heart and spirit. It is centered on an accepted communal obligation to justice rather than 'individual rights.' It would mean a way of seeking inner sanctum that gives rise to compassion, self-effacement, mutual understanding, and humble spirituality. It attests to a belief that the individual is implicated in the whole and that the self bears witness to a transcendent, trans-phenomenal capacity for human good, no matter how complicated and ethically complex that 'good' might be(come).

Ubuntu's Contribution to the Global Politic, Pedagogic Engagement with 'The Other,' and the Ethical Commitments of Research

Most saliently, and in great consciousness of the complexity of global politics and contemporary social problems we face in the world as ever interconnected humanity, Archbishop Tutu remarks that: "You can never win a war against terror as long as there are conditions in the world that make people desperate – poverty, disease, ignorance ..." (in Lloyd, 2007, p.1).

A notion of 'humble togetherness' or Ubuntu in facing the shared responsibility of world poverty, may go a long way to addressing these problems and provide alternatives to the way governments act in response to 'threat' and 'fear' as well as to the perceived need to 'protect their own interests'. Ubuntu undoubtedly emphasizes responsibilities and obligations toward a collective well-being. On a global scale, greater co-operation and mutual understanding is very necessary to a sustainable future for all with respect to the ecological, moral and social well-being of its global citizens, human and otherwise. Ubuntu provides legitimizing spaces for transcendence of injustice and a more democratic, egalitarian and ethical engagement of human beings in relationship with each other. In this sense, Ubuntu offers hope and possibility in its contribution to human rights, not only in the South African and African contexts, but across the globe. In support of this final assertion on human rights, Tim Murithi, Programme Officer at the United Nations Institute for Training and Research, writes on a culturally inclusive notion of human rights and its implications for a new international charter. Murithi (2004) asserts that the global campaign for human rights needs to be given new life. He believes that this needs to be achieved through reformulating the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In reference to the universal ideals of social, economic and ecological justice, Murithi avers that we need to re-articulate our aspirations to human rights far more in the 'language of obligations', which would commit more unambiguously to action. He notes: "In essence, a re-articulation of human rights from an ubuntu perspective adds value to the human rights movement by placing more of an emphasis on the obligations that we have towards the 'other'" (p. 15).

Ubuntu is not to be taken as another meta-narrative for global engagement, however. It should not take on the dominant position of yet another scatological Truth. It should not become the new 'said' in Levinas's terms, 'the said' being that which strives for universality, solidarity and closure, but should maintain the openness of ambiguity and uncertainty that resides uncomfortably with the tensions, challenges and possibilities of the 'Saying' in relation to encounters with global 'others' (See Edgoose, 2001). Its misappropriation and recontextualization (Bernstein, 2000) might also become dangerous in its new configurations through prevailing power relations in the contexts of its adoption. These are always the dangers of philosophy at the level of 'implementation' or as universalized ideology. Much like Hegel's (1820) owl of Minerva, who spreads his wings only with the falling of the dusk, philosophy can only speak of events in their hindsight, rather than command a power to project prescriptively on a generalized future. In the same sense, Ubuntu should always find its source and rootedness at the level of one human being to another, of a human being to the earth, of a human

being within community, as difficult as that is to understand or define or as complex as its various constitutions may become. While Ubuntu values obligation and responsibility, it is also defined by acceptance of difference and sacrificial care for another. Ubuntu's power is with its ethical spiritual commitment, its propensity to value humility and human dignity, not with its capacity to impose a set of values on an-Other.

Nevertheless, as principles for pedagogic engagement, and as a guide to living within an ethic that places responsibility for social and ecological justice within a web of interrelated collectives, Ubuntu has much to offer, not only within the Southern African context, indigenous peoples and historical location from which it arises and has lived and breathed, but in what it offers for all humanity across the globe as to be interpreted and embraced variously within their situated contexts. On a personal level, it has also offered a way for me to understand the importance of an ethics of engagement in educational research. It is to this that I turn my attention now.

A Research Journey as Pedagogic Journey of the Self

I completed my Ph.D. at The University of British Columbia. As previously introduced, my dissertation is a critical exploration of the construction of disadvantage in school mathematics in social context. It provides a reflexive, narrative account of a pedagogic journey towards understanding the 'pedagogizing of difference' (Swanson, 1998, 2004, 2005) in mathematics classrooms and its realizations as *lived disadvantage* in and across diverse socio-political, economic, cultural, and pedagogic contexts. As mentioned, I returned to South Africa some years back and stayed for several months to engage in fieldwork in schooling communities there.

Two of the communities in which I engaged in research were situated in contexts of relative and extreme socio-economic poverty. Consequently, ethical issues associated with respectful ways of being in research with such communities, the moral dilemmas faced through research engagement, the positionality of research relationships, the power relations invested in such relationships and through institutional engagement, as well as the researcher's 'ways of seeing', all became critical issues of concern in the research process. It was necessary for me to find less objectifying ways of being in research; ways which would disrupt and decolonize dominant meanings, not contribute to 'deficit discourse' (Bernstein, 2000) and 'disadvantage'—meanings produced from privileged perspectives.

It was here that Ubuntu provided a vision and framework for me for respectful engagement in research of this nature; one that permitted reflexivity, reciprocity, community connectedness through a sense of 'humble togetherness', and cross-cultural understanding. It also provided opportunities for life-enriching and transformative experiences, and, importantly, spiritual growth. A focus on Ubuntu in its socio-cultural and political context, helped to *highlight* the multitude of interrelated moral, ethical and ideological dilemmas faced in fieldwork experiences in a context of 'poverty', while paradoxically also serving to provide a way *through* the quagmires and contradictions, and achieve transformation through a transcendent

spirituality. It is through my narrative exploration of research issues, ambiguities and contradictions in their full, often irresolvable and ungraspable complexity – narrative that often bordered on autoethnography – that Ubuntu was drawn into my research, shaping my research experiences, in ways that offered lived pedagogies of hope and possibility.

The Narrative in Context

To exemplify only a small aspect of this research engagement with Ubuntu and how, through a reflexive narratizing, it might deconstruct hegemonic meanings and allow for other possibilities of being in the world, I will offer an extract from a narrative in my dissertation. I have elaborated on this in Swanson (2005, 2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2009a, 2009b).¹⁶

To set the scene, I am sitting in the office of a principal at a missionary elementary school situated in a shanty or informal settlement. The conditions of poverty are evident everywhere.

The Narrative Excerpt...

“You mathematics education researchers,” he says, half jokingly. “I don’t know.” He laughs and shakes his head a little self-consciously or to be polite perhaps. He knows he is positioning me now as one of ‘Those.’ He is congenial and friendly about it and I can see that he hopes I don’t mind! I *don’t* mind...I understand and appreciate this in context of this cultural aspect of South African humour. “All these new methods and this progressive education thing,” he continues after a long pause, “and these kids *still* don’t know their times tables! So what is the good of all of it?” At first, he assumes the posture of someone in debate, but then he jumps up and starts to stride across his office, gesticulating as he talks. I sit on the other side of his desk as he performs for me, explicating his argument against progressivism in an extemporaneous and agitated dance. “When I grew up, we did it by rote, and *at least* I can work out my budget and do multiplication without having to reach for a calculator...But these kids today, if you ask them what is two times seven, they don’t know.” He goes on: “But we have to embrace this progressive education thing.”

I realize that this statement has more to do with his positioning of me as “a white South African mathematics teacher,” or *even more* so, “a white Canadian researcher,” and his own relational positioning in this context, than it is about the pedagogics or politics of educational progressivism itself. And despite this...for a moment...I want to ask what I think are crucial questions, which, for me, highlight the contradictions of the statements I have just heard from the principal of this elementary school. I want to ask him why it is, that from my perspective, I have not *really* evidenced any real attempt to engage in any progressive education practices within these classrooms...why I have seen *so much* rote learning...when any pedagogic learning took place at all...or why I have seen, from my perspective, so much apparent indifference...why it is that corporal punishment is still used

here when it has been made *illegal* to engage in physically punitive practices in South African schools...why so many of the teachers are so seldom *in* the classroom when the National Minister of Education at the time, Kader Asmal, has made urgent and repeated appeals to teachers across the country to take their jobs seriously for the country's sake, for the sake of our youth and the future generation of South Africa now in creation? Where does the proverbial 'buck stop,' who is responsible, who cares, why not, and how can we make a difference?

I want to ask him why he closes the school early so frequently, causing very small children to have to walk home alone, often unescorted back to their homes in the informal settlement where they are not attended to or protected because their parents or caretakers are at work? Where does his responsibility to the community end ... or where does it start? Why does he use class time to have meetings with his staff, and why so frequently is learning interrupted for apparently, *from my perspective*, inconsequential issues? Why does he legitimize teachers' missing classes by engaging in these practices himself? Why can't meetings take place after school?

A part of me wants to speak out. I want to tell him what I think. I want to tell him that I think it is not right. That this is 'just not good enough'! Is this what we were all liberated for...? Wasn't it to try and make a difference, to turn it around, to 'fight the good fight'! Not to give in to oppression; not to submit to the authority of poverty and consequently the authority of privilege that establishes the poverty; not to succumb to the worst form of oppression, in Freirian terms, when the oppressed begin to oppress themselves.

I want to ask him why? Why he is not seeing it, why he is so bound by this model of oppression, this discourse of poverty and situated experience that he cannot step outside of it, even for a moment, to see what it is like.... Is it that poverty is so rooted in 'situatedness', that it is so delimiting, so strangulating, that we cannot create even a momentary spark of insight? Does it require a stepping aside, a looking awry, a new platform, another place, a firm patch of new ground, to find it, to visualize it, to imagine? Does envisioning require the separation or abstraction from local context and its firm rootedness to be able to provide perspective, generate new interpretations and conceptualizations, provide them with the flesh of real hope, of tangible possibility?

And I know at this moment that there is no Ubuntu here...there is only me – the researcher, and him – the principal...And then the blinding moment of anger passes and I am back within this situated reality. I look out of the window. I see two girls scuffing their shoes in the red dirt. The dry dust rises in a small wisp of smoke. Then one girl suddenly grabs the other girl from the back by her hair and pulls her down into a kneeling position. There is anguish on the victim's face, but she doesn't resist. And it appears to me that this has happened to her many times before and she is no longer indignant, resistant, affronted. Was she ever otherwise given the space to be such, I wonder? Her hopeless resignation angers me.

I jump up and move to the window looking down onto the scene in the courtyard, the crisscrossing Euclidean grid of the window frame between us. The bully turns her eyes towards me and looks through the pane...looks through her

own pain...even with a blank undaunted stare...staring into my face contorted with a horrible mixture of anger, disappointment and pity. The Principal sees my reaction and he too jumps up to have a look at what I am looking at. He swears under his breath in Afrikaans, “Darrie blêrrie boggers van graad sewe kinders... uit die blêrrie klasskamer alweer.”¹⁷ His composure is broken, the posturing has disappeared...we are back to the immediacy and brutal ‘reality’ of the moment, and partially recovering his previous tone, he relays to me in English: “Their teacher isn’t here again today,” as if I might not have known this self-evident piece of information. “Excuse me a minute,” he says brusquely, and walks hastily out of the office, across the courtyard, up the steep steps and stops in the open doorway of the offending classroom.

From my visual perspective, the classroom behind the principal’s dominant form is dark, unseeable and formless, like an auditorium when the lights have gone down – ready for the performance...a performance on a ‘stage-in-the-round’. The two girls have already disappeared back into the same room, caught out, scampering like a pair of frightened rabbits back into their dark burrow. I can see the principal shouting and gesticulating threateningly. He is silhouetted against the dark doorway, delineated by the door, and through the windowpane I can hear nothing of what he says...there is only silence...and it is loud in my ears...it is as if I am watching an old-fashioned silent movie, being played out before me...a performance in silence on the theme of silence...visible, audible silence...

I am trying to comprehend the scene. I think back on what precipitated the current chain of events, to make sense of it. I think of the two rabbit girls scurrying away when the Voice of Authority entered the scene...I am a schoolgirl again... waiting in the principal’s office. I am remembering the fear of bullies, bullies that took all forms, classmates and teachers. I am remembering the smell and taste of fear...the fractured, brutal, images of authority and its violent sting. I feel the same sick feelings coming back...deafening fragments of memories. I feel like a bewildered animal caught in the headlights of this strange blinding reenactment of repeated repressive realities...

At that moment...and it was not an epiphany...but a slow blurred form taking root... re-rooting in my mind. It was a slow re-realization of what I had done by wanting to ‘speak out’ and to tell this principal that I thought it was ‘just not good enough.’ It was a re-cognition of my *own* voice of violence, of what brutality I had done in feeding into the discourse on “disadvantage.” I re-realized that my thoughts, framed within the discursive roots of my socialization, my education and knowledge, my own perceived empowerment as an adult, and my experience of teaching mostly within the context of privilege – which, through the temporal and spatial, defines the moment and place of poverty – had established that “disadvantage” as “plain to see” (McLaren, Leonardo, & Allen, 2000, p. 113).

I began to re-realize that in my initial thought-words of anger, I had been taking on the colonizing voice which produces the deficit, and that creates, validates and establishes ‘the problem’ from outside...from a place out there that can speak unmonitored by its own surveillance...I had been doing the same thing as that which I had surveyed in the courtyard. I was producing and reproducing the very

conditions that produced the bully/bullying in the first place, ensuring its reproduction through my own voyeuristic perspective and reproductive deficit language, albeit a silent language of thoughts.

I too had become a bully. I was complicit with a system or discourse and a well-entrenched paradigm of thinking that constructs ‘the problem’, establishes the ‘truth’ on ‘deficit’, and *lays blame*...

I realize that my vantage point was at fault. These are the power principles that inform not only the political gaze from the perspective of the self, but also control the distributions of the spatial/temporal dichotomy and that define the political economy of context by assisting in the production of the poverty/privilege hierarchy, and which define the roles of subjects in context...

I hear the deficit voices again...bullying voices...some voices of educationalists, specialists, and well-known people in authority in South African Education...people in the ‘new arena’ of post-liberation education...people I interviewed. “The problem lies with our teachers...they are underqualified, demotivated, lacking experience and expertise, and there is not enough of them. Our failures in mathematics can be directly attributed to the teachers...*they* are our problem...”

I realize that in my own way, I was feeding into this, re-creating this monster, re-establishing this deficit discourse. I realize that in creating the teachers, principal and their pedagogic practices in this “disadvantaged community” as *lacking*, as the “real problem,” it was an *escape*, a way of not facing up to not understanding, not seeing the source of power and how it threads its way into the repressive web.

Yes, I had become the bully. And the bully in the courtyard was as much, if not more, my *victim* of constructed “disadvantage” and the pedagogy of pain and poverty that it produces as she was a bully in herself. The principal was a victim of it too, and I had not even *begun* to imagine the strangulating and delimiting conditions that this discourse served to produce and in which he was constrained to operate. This was the ‘pedagogizing of difference’ (Swanson, 1998; 2005) indeed, and a discourse in which I had participated.

The principal came back into the room, looking a little harassed. A ‘sideshow’ had interrupted and seemed to detract from ‘the conversation.’ But, in fact, it was a critical fragment of the whole, a necessary contribution to understanding the resolution of the narrative, and in which our initial ‘polite’ conversation preceding ‘the sideshow’ had been the essential exposition. I, myself, had moved through several modes of *looking*, premised by various experiential podiums of perspective. Consequently, when I had been angry and critical, my vantage point had been the context of privilege in which I had gained much of my own teaching experience. When I had overcome my anger and realized my role in the co-constructed authorship of power, I had returned to my early youth and to remembering, remembering what it was like to be bullied and to feel the hand of violence and the voice of humiliation...and it was only *then* that I could begin to understand-feel with a *deeper listening* – the kind of deeper listening that renders one human.

It had required a range of senses as it had required a shift in perspective. I had moved from a ‘looking on’ and the voyeuristic power instantiated in perspectives of ‘seeing’, to a ‘listening to’, where the eyes are quieted and humbled

by the sights and sounds within darkened silence, and the sense of hearing is peaked...tuning *into* silence...

This had been my route. Instead of trying to find the “root *of* the problem” and trying to “root *out* the problem,” like a cancer from living tissue, I was moving towards searching for “*the source*.” The source of the problem lay silently *behind* the construction of “the problem” itself and threaded its way, like a tributary, to my very doorstep...I too was complicit, a collaborator of deficit discourse, a root of “the problem’s” routedness. Now I became responsible as well, through acknowledging that responsibility.

The I-you dichotomy [which Buber’s (1996) *I-Thou* relationship would oppose] had been broken by the emergence of a new bond of responsibility, a *humbling togetherness, a sense of Ubuntu*. I needed to *listen* collaboratively to that “source” in collectively finding a way together of “re-sourcing” towards non-impoverishment, other possibilities and mutual healing. With the sense of responsibility and humility came the opportunity for transformation and transcendence, both political and spiritual. It was the kind of calling in which one could recognize oneself in the image of the other as an organic relationship of ‘humble togetherness’.

In Closing

Ubuntu offers a contribution to an ethic of engagement with the other. It provides a lens, through the embrace of critical reflexive narrative methodology, that helps foreground existing positions of dominance and deficit in discourses in ways that open up opportunities for resisting them. It offers the possibility of dialogue about the nature of transformation and transcendence beyond personal, political paradoxes informed by neoliberalism and neocolonialism. It creates a rootedness with the daily, local and lived. A disposition of Ubuntu facilitates the exploration of less objectifying ways of being in research through the inclusion of the self and the self’s role in achieving humble togetherness with the research community. It offers hope of engendering pedagogies of possibility away from dichotomous discourse and positivist approaches to qualitative research. By confronting our colonizing ways of seeing, a transcendent spirituality may be found through ‘humble togetherness.’ Ubuntu, therefore, contributes to decolonizing hegemonic meanings, heralding the opportunity for renewal and personal transformation. It offers guidance in terms of our responsibilities and obligations to egalitarianism and human dignity. It affords a way of knowing that helps us learn to become human.

NOTES

- ¹ This has resonance with Hannah Arendt’s (1968) assertion that the past always intrudes on the present. There is no objective present divorced from a historical context. It brings in to play the understanding that what precedes us influences how we engage with the world, the choices we make, our values and beliefs in and understandings of that world, and how we proceed with what we claim to know about it. We are always within (con)text, as Derrida implies in his comment: “‘Il n’y a pas de hors-texte’ (There is no outside-text). Extrapolating this to a question of ethics and

responsibility, we can never be independent of or ‘free’ from obligation in our relationship with others. This would be consistent with Emmanuel Levinas’s philosophy that he calls a ‘first philosophy’, (where philosophy is defined for him as a ‘wisdom of love’). In this philosophy, an ethical responsibility towards the Other precedes subjectivity. There is strong resonance with this other-centered ontology and many indigenous philosophies that espouse that the individual only exists in consummate interrelatedness with many others that constitute a whole with nature and the Earth. Ubuntu rests on this deep humanistic philosophy of obligatory interrelatedness.

- ² *Voices in the Silence* is a critical exploration of the construction of disadvantage in school mathematics in social context. It provides a reflexive, narrative account of a pedagogic journey towards understanding the pedagogizing of difference in mathematics classrooms and its realizations as pedagogized disadvantage in and across diverse socio-political, economic, cultural, and pedagogic contexts. Fieldwork occurred within the Cape Province of South Africa, in schooling communities with socio-economic, cultural and historical differences. Research took the form of interviews, discussions, narrative-sharing, and participant observation, in a recent post-apartheid context. In resistance to perpetuating hierarchized, linear or scientific approaches to research within traditional social sciences and mathematics education, I embrace an arts-based methodology. Through narrative and poetry, I engage with the socio-political, cultural and pedagogic implications of the social construction of disadvantage in school mathematics practice. The dissertation, therefore, offers interdisciplinary approaches to critical concerns of inequity and access, calling on the emotive, spiritual, embodied, and personal domains of experience in problematizing the (re)production of disadvantage. Consequently, I broaden the scope of interpretive possibilities to encompass interrogation of dominant discourses and universalizing ideologies within the social domain, which colonize meanings. These include globalization, neo-liberalism, neo-colonialism, and aspects of progressivism and pedagogic constructivism, in the way in which they compete for hegemony within mathematics classroom contexts as sites of struggle for meaning, informing discursive positions of disadvantage, delimiting practice and disempowering students constructed in terms of social difference discourses such as ethnicity, gender, class, race, poverty, and ability, amongst other positions. The incommensurability of certain social domain discourses produce disjunctions, paradoxes, contradictions and dilemmas, experienced as a lived curriculum of pedagogic disadvantage in the lives of students and teachers within contexts of constructed disadvantage.
- ³ The metaphor of ghosts is purposeful in that it has resonance with Derrida’s ghosts that are ever present and absent as they haunt us in our engagement with ‘the other.’ In this narration, I make conscious in my own writing the interlocution with ghosts as a way of exposing how, in Derrida’s (1994) terms, the author or narrator is never fully present to themselves, that we dance with absences we can neither capture nor see, only as shadows of what might be, and that these absences are ever present in what we do affirm as real, always-already erasing that presence. In this sense, absence is ghostliness. I have given more depth to this discussion in reference to the complexities of research and research ethics in Swanson (2007a).
- ⁴ I am reminded of Derrida’s (1994) words in his concluding paragraph in *Specters of Marx*: “We, in a sense, become mediums, allowing the ghosts of the past to tell their stories, our stories, through us” (p. 176).
- ⁵ Afrikaans for: “Good Afternoon, (Mrs.) Ma’am. Can I perhaps help you (madam) with something?” [This is the polite way of addressing a stranger. The use of ‘you’ would be considered impolite.] Many of the mixed-race communities in the Cape Province of South Africa speak a dialect of Afrikaans as their mother tongue.
- ⁶ Afrikaans for: “Good Afternoon, (Mr.) Sir. I wanted to come and visit. I was here a long time ago.”
- ⁷ “Oh, what a shame, Ma’am”: The Anglicization of Afrikaans is commonplace in these communities, so that a mix of English and Afrikaans in the same sentence is often heard.
- ⁸ “Yes, for a long time.” “Ja” is slang for ‘yes’ in South African English and is borrowed from the Afrikaans.

- ⁹ “Ag, siestog! What a shame! I am sorry!”: ‘Ag, siestog’, is an Afrikaans expression of sympathy. To say “I am sorry” in this context in South African culture does not mean that you claim responsibility for harm done to another as in ‘I apologise’. It simply means that you are feeling for that other person and you understand how they must be feeling. In other words, you are sorry to see that they are suffering.
- ¹⁰ This is a pseudonym.
- ¹¹ Skollie: from the Afrikaans, a common street criminal; someone up to no good; a deviant person.
- ¹² The Strand: A remote stretch of beach with white ancient-marine sand, where a number of murders of this nature have taken place over the years. ‘Strand’ means ‘beach’ in Afrikaans.
- ¹³ Boot: South African and British English for ‘trunk’ of a car.
- ¹⁴ “Where have all the fishes gone?” acts as a double entendre in particular reference to the famous song, “Where have all the flowers gone?” Like the original antiwar folk song written by Pete Seeger and Joe Hickerson, it reminds us of the lyrics in the chorus, specifically the line that asks: “Oh, when will they ever learn?” In respect of the global responsibility of environmental devastation suffered within local communities, reinforcing oppressive social and political relationships within and between them, perhaps we also need to ask, “When will they ever learn?” or more inclusively of the global community, “When will we ever learn?”
- ¹⁵ It is a web of ‘glocal’ interrelations; an ever-interdependent global mesh of influence and effect that impacts local communities.
- ¹⁶ Please note that a version of the original narrative appears as Roots/Routes I & II in Swanson, D. M. (2009a & b).
- ¹⁷ Those bloody buggers of grade seven children ... out of the bloody classroom again!

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