HOW CREATING A SECOND IDENTITY COULD RESHAPE EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY

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The Other Self
“How the f— did I go from Stuyvesant High School to Rikers Island?”

Davon asked. He had an easy gait, unmistakable charm, and a chipped tooth. The classroom was messy: notebook pages strewn over the floor, crumpled fast-food wrappers left to unfurl, and folders splashed open on desks. Davon looked in my direction, straight-faced, expecting an answer. His life story was so unlikely, a novelty almost, if not for the fact that I had seen it many times over. A smart black student earns admission into a specialized high school, only to land in state detention before he graduates. He sat next to me and handed over his last assignment. The silence was heavy between us. “I don’t have an answer,” I said to him. But the truth was I had no interest in the answer because the answer was merely a diagnosis of the problem: failing neighborhoods, rigged economies, racism. I needed a solution for him instead.

In all of my time as an educator working with justice-involved youth and teaching in prisons or public high schools, I’ve never met a single student who could shake off the limitations of urban culture. This culture demands of us a performance — a way of existing in the world that ensures our bodily safety first, but makes us prone to behaviors that undermine our learning. I see it in the exaggerated maleness, or the spurning of education. I see it in the anger directed at students who are smart, or the ways violence is celebrated in the classroom. None of these behaviors make for a strong student. But for the urban student, actions that seem unruly to educators are effective — indeed necessary — ways of surviving. Accordingly then, I have termed this condition PTS: Performing to Survive. It is one I suspect is gripping-to-survive strategy.

For example, my most disruptive students are often the most popular — my most violent students, the most respected. I was one of these students. Under the rules of this cultural system, the popular students, or those who command respect, face almost no physical threats from the student body. This is a high privilege in a school based in the ghetto — to not have to worry feverishly over your physical safety. In fact, it is the highest privilege: one that many seek out but only a few enjoy, whereupon hundreds of black and Latinx youth are left to worry about the daily threat of violence. This is precisely why almost every family I know picks public high schools for their children based on where they might be safe and not on academic rigor. It is precisely why my mother worked 20 hours of overtime each week to fund my private high school education — in public school, under the compulsions of PTS, I had already been suspended eight times and arrested once. I remember this distinctly. I was in the eighth grade, and my teacher noticed that I was carrying a switchblade on school grounds. Honestly, I had no reason to be in possession of it, but I was preoccupied with ideas of how I wanted to be perceived by the student body and the safety it would secure for me. This is precisely the irony of it all though: The same performance meant to serve as our bodily life insurance oftentimes compromises our very learning and therefore undermines our lives. Said a different way, this posturing both protects and cripples. In our students’ neighborhoods too — spaces that are often reproductions of their classrooms — this performance style of living has worked well. It has kept them alive. Tragically, these representations are rarely who they truly are, but always who they must pretend to be.

None of this is mere coincidence, though, not nearly. If we are to fully understand PTS — its implications for education and community — we must first agree that history is absolute. We must agree, unerringly, that history happened, and though it doesn’t determine where we will end up, it has, without question, influenced the trajectory of all people. In other words, there is no way to understand the third episode if you haven’t watched the first. How else do we make sense of narrative if not chronologically? For this reason, it must be true that our political lives are the culmination of histories, and so we must insist, again, if we are to understand this condition intelligibly, that history is the soil. It is where this starts. There is no way forward without national agreement on this point. We are history: It has shaped our words, our heart, and perhaps most importantly it has helped arrange the meaning of our lives.

And so the truth is, history says, that the failing ghettos are a product of racist American strategy, and in these ghettos is where the PTS experience proliferates. Anyone wishing to dispute this fact should know that there is no winning an intellectual fight against history’s honesty in this regard. All throughout American history, our country has taken very specific steps to ensure that African Americans were relegated to certain neighborhoods. These neighborhoods, unsurprisingly, were engineered to fail. Naturally the ruin followed, and since then, in the ghettos, we’ve been forced to adopt this performing-to-survive strategy.
Growing up I was the performer. I lived in a very dangerous part of the Bronx, and that threat always found itself into the schools. Though I was an apt student — versed in history, clear in my writing — I was really afraid to be so publicly. I had realized that there was no safety in intellect, only risks, and dangerous ones. I remember a hot day in grade school where we were presented with two options: either go outside and play ball, or continue discussing ideas of tyranny in Shakespeare’s Macbeth. I wanted badly to stay in, to chat about Macbeth’s violent temperament and all the ruin he brought to Scotland, but I was awfully afraid of what it would mean to my friends. Accordingly, I learned to keep a public self and a private self: In the classroom, as a student, I purposely seemed dispassionate about learning and education — snubbing teachers, skipping classes — but at home books set me aflame. I trained my body this way for years, and Davon, who had gone down in New York City’s largest gang indictment, could see the finished product in me as my student. I gesture like he did, ambled in the same streets, but I also played chess and wrote fiction. I knew folks he was indicted with intimately — they were longtime friends. But I also knew novelists and scientists. Davon was also really surprised about my tattoos: They were discernible and out for the professional world to see, or as he understood it, borne from love. In many ways he was right. But it took me a while to understand this reasoning, and it would’ve been impossible without trying to “share” in her perceived duties as a mother. This, in my estimation, is what empathy looks like.

Reading was much the same: An opportunity to hate the narrator would always present itself, but so too would the chance to understand the narrator. I came to appreciate this exercise for its novelty. The curiosity it provoked. I began to read in a greedy way early on, imagining myself in many spaces unlike my own, afoot on grounds I had never traveled, or defending moral positions I’d been unlikely to consider. It was hard but worth the difficulty. I quickly realized that writing was a flexing of this muscle too; It requires great empathy to think up a character fundamentally different than oneself. It is then twice the work to write that character fairly because of course writing an archetype is no labor for the imagination. But as an educator, these realizations, this joy, meant little if it was only mine alone to experience. I wanted to live this with all of my students, and in some ways, too, I wanted to move beyond mere joy. What was any of this worth if some of us were dying, being shot, jailed indefinitely, and failing out of schools? This called me to action. I began to think of all the ways that reading and writing helped me better understand myself, especially during times when my identity felt splintered. I considered all the ways that reading and writing helped fund my social ingenuity, the ways it helped me move from world to world convincingly. This was how Writing the Other Self came to be.

In all four stages of this curriculum, students were asked to challenge their own inflexibility. They were asked to reimagine themselves outside of the rigidity of the PTSD experience. For example, I had an 18-year-old student who was heavily gang-involved, never got his work done, and was aggressive in class. I first met him in a classroom on Rikers Island, but as stipulated by his plea deal when released, he was ordered to join the high school equivalency program I also taught at for justice-involved youth. After working carefully with this student, he wrote a new identity for himself, raised by three women. I found it nearly impossible to love my mother, grandmother, and godmother the right way if I refused to understand them first. My mother, for example, beat me viciously as a child, and empathy kept me from hating her because it helped me understand the tenets of tough love. We lived in a dangerous neighborhood, and she figured her motherly violence would preempt a more capricious state violence — her motherly violence, of course, being borne of love. In many ways she was right. But it took me a while to understand this reasoning, and it would’ve been impossible without trying to “share” in her perceived duties as a mother.

“Very few teachers understood the need for this performance. Those that didn’t actually shamed me for it. But now I’m the teacher and I understand the act. In this gap is where art finds its rightful place.”
that was a musician. The musician was gentle and obsessed with learning piano. The course material was no less difficult, but as his newer self, he worked hard at it. This was a miracle for this particular student. I then challenged him to inhabit the new character over the weekend, and so he asked his mom to take him to a jazz museum in Harlem. It was something he would never have done otherwise, away from the dangers of his project housing in Brooklyn.

I also ask students to give themselves a new name. This is the most important stage of this course, meant to denote the beginning of a new identity. During my time teaching on Rikers, tutoring and leading workshops at different prisons, it’s always been true that prisoners adopt monikers. In fact this has always been true in the hood too. But the more interesting observation is the physiological relationship between the name and self-expectation. My students on Rikers react differently when peers use their legal names versus peers addressing them by their nicknames. It’s fascinating. There’s almost this summoning of a unique physical force — that otherwise isn’t accessible to them — when their bynames are called. This is especially true when circumstances are dangerous. I’ll never forget a student recounting his first year up north in Clinton Correctional Facility, where he was due to spend the next seven years of his life. He said to me, “Whenever they called me Trigga, I knew it was game time. It’s like I wasn’t afraid of anything. No one could beat me.”

The inverse wasn’t just as true, though. For example, if someone called him by his legal name, and not Trigga, there was no supernatural strength to draw from. Part of it was that calling on his legal name signaled a degree of situational safety in the same way it does when romantic partners call on our “pet names.” In other words, there is no reason for alarm and, consequently, no reason for “transformation.” But the other reason, and maybe the more important one, was simply that the force wasn’t procurable without the nickname. An increased physical force literally became a constituent resource of his survivalist identity. Again, this fascinated me, especially because this had always been true in the hood too. He went on to talk about the horrific things he had done while incarcerated, and every time we had these conversations, he made sure to conclude with a reminder that “Trigga was dead.” I’ve taken this learning and used it specifically to address PTSD. One of my students, Chris, fighting his second gun charge, decided to take on the French name, Jean. He became deeply involved in this self-fashioning. I was shocked when he told me that he wanted to learn French! It was a crisp and immediate reminder of how far we could go to change ourselves.

In this course they also wrote scripts. The scripts are total reinventions of how they speak: If they once said, for example, “I’m O.D. sad” — an expression in the black vernacular where O.D. literally means over dosed, a stand in for “over-the-top” — they might instead say, “I’m disheartened.” Urban language, which takes its shape around our urban culture, is beautiful but sometimes problematic. It is a big part of the trouble in my classroom. Violence is normalized, and there is great self-disregard. These habits limit their function in the professional world. But this course could change that forever. For example, Tracy, a mentee of mine who had served a year in the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility for women, created a second identity that was a spoken word poet. Over the course of a few weeks, as she worked on a script for this new identity, she learned many new words. Her improved vocabulary helped her perform successfully in an interview, and she was hired.

They are also responsible for giving the identities hobbies. When I was a fiction student in an MFA program, the novelist Colum McCann would abruptly stop the workshop of my stories to ask, “Does the mother wear makeup?” or “does the son like to travel? Name two places he would go.” Quizzing about these details had nothing to do with the actual narrative but was entirely a matter of intimately knowing my characters. I want the students to really know these new identities. The more involved they are in the nuances of recreating themselves, the more they’ll care about the “person” they’re creating, and the more they care about the “person” they’re creating, the more time they’ll spend inhabiting these characters. This could reshape education entirely. One student even suggested that I bring an acting coach into the class. I asked why, and he told me that he wanted to practice new gestures, voice inflections, and walking styles. He literally wanted his second identity to be an entirely new person.

This is all extremely difficult to write about, especially for public reading. My fear has long been that the perpetrators will co-opt this message about PTSD. They will weaponize it against us and argue that it’s been our fault all along. They will champion personal responsibility and obscure, with mastery and intention, the country’s criminal irresponsibility. But certainly one has caused the other, and it is delinquent to talk about this in any other way. There could not be our violence without America’s first. There could not be PTSD, this performing-to-survive strategy, without a long narrative of oppression. This, history says, is indisputably true.

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