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‘Strong in their Minds’: young people’s poems across an ocean

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ABSTRACT This article stresses the quality of universality within young people’s poetry. The writer uses the poetry mainly written by children of Pakistani origin living in Pitsmoor and Fir Vale in north-east Sheffield, Yorkshire, England, as a stimulus for the creative writing of children of the Mohawk nation in the reservation school of Tyendinaga Territory in Eastern Ontario, Canada. The similar qualities and themes of both sets of poems illustrate both the internationalism of the imagination, and a critical consciousness within children that stretches across oceans.

Ever since I began to teach creative writing in my classrooms in Tobago, the Caribbean and Stepney, East London in the late sixties, I have marvelled at the ability of young people not only to reach out and empathise with others in faraway places of the world, but through their ever-incisive imaginations to emulate each others’ forms and modes of poetic expression within the universality of childhood.

In 2005, during a period of voluntary teaching in Tyendinaga, Ontario, a territory of the Mohawk indigenous nation, I used poems written by British inner-city children of Sheffield – mainly of Pakistani origins – as the stimulus to encourage the writing of poetry by the young Mohawk Canadians. In Britain I had commonly employed the life experiences of Chileans, South Africans, Palestinians, Angolans, Turkish migrant workers in Germany or Mexicans in California, Omanis, the Irish of Belfast, Namibians and Native Americans to prompt the imaginative and empathetic instincts of my students.[1] In Sheffield, we adopted the poem *Speak* by the Pakistani laureate Faiz Ahmad Faiz as our watchwords, and applied his truths about oracy to the labours and focus of literacy. The poem became an imaginative talisman:

Speak

Speak – your lips are free
Speak – this tongue is still yours.
This magnificent body
Is still yours.
Speak – your life is still yours.
Look inside the smithy –
Leaping flames, red-hot iron.
Padlocks open wide
Their jaws.
Chains disintegrate.
Speak – there is a little time
But little though it is
It is enough.
Time enough
Before the body perishes –
Before the tongue atrophies.
Speak – truth still lives.
Say what you have
To say. [2]

Now, in taking their British day-to-day lives to a Mohawk reservation school in Canada, I was seeking to extend this cultural and geographical process of the imagination in ways none of us could have imagined during the early to mid nineties, when the Sheffield poems had been forged in a Pitsmoor classroom.

Many of these Sheffield poets from the neighbourhoods of Pitsmoor, Firvale and Page Hall were teenagers of Pakistani origins. Their parents' homelands had been in Mirpur and Kashmir, where their families had been subsistence farmers. 'I was born in a very remote village where donkeys were the main form of transportation and buying bricks to build a house was out of people's reach entirely'[3], declared one Pakistani pioneer migrant. 'We were peasants and toiled as labourers day and night worrying about not having enough to eat'. Although the original intention had been to come to South Yorkshire 'just for five years', and return with enough money to improve their families' lives, many settled into a new life in Sheffield. 'I came to Sheffield for the work', declared another father, 'but perhaps this city has become my home. I remember the English people I've worked with in Sheffield. I can not think of the possibility of living outside Sheffield. This is my home.' Despite the struggles – to find regular work, and somewhere to live, to unite their families and resist racism, Pakistani newcomers found a living as steelworkers, taxi drivers and transport workers. Others saved earnings and bought premises for fast-food restaurants, halal butchers or small shops in the Pitsmoor and Firvale neighbourhoods. Their children grew up as bilingual Sheffielders, speaking Panjabi at home and Sheffieldese English at school.

In 1784, a group of 110 Mohawks who had sided with the British during the American War of Independence arrived at the Bay of Quinte, a large inlet into Lake Ontario, to establish Tyendinaga Territory within Canada. They had escaped from the Mohawk Valley in what is now up-state New York, and chose for their home a former fishing village, believed to be the home of a past peacemaker, Deganawidha, surrounded by rolling countryside that was potentially rich agricultural land.

Succeeding generations built up a stable and prospering farming community in Tyendinaga, with some men frequently following the Mohawk tradition of working outside the territory – particularly as iron workers on high-rise construction sites, where teams of Mohawks established a formidable reputation in erecting the steel frames for skyscrapers in many American and Canadian cities, particularly in New York, Chicago and Toronto.

Now, in the first decade of the 21st century, Mohawk children completed their elementary education (until the eighth grade) at their reservation school before moving on to high schools in the towns outside the Tyendinaga Territory, usually in the adjacent town of Belleville.

In my classes I decided to read with them a series of poems written by my ex-students of Pitsmoor and Firvale about the places where thy lived, their neighbourhoods and the people with whom they lived, their families, neighbours and communities. These poems had strong observational and critical dimensions, and I wondered how they would be received in a local school of what was a tightly-knit reservation community, administered by the locally elected band, or council. In my classes in Sheffield I had deliberately employed the writing of poetry at school as a means of sharpening both use of language and critical consciousness: using the condensed and meaning-laden dimension of poetical language as a vehicle for understanding the pressures and forces bearing down on the young poets' lives and those of their families, friends and communities. The principle was that such clear, concise and frequently figuratively-emphatic language must tell the truth of the local world as the poets saw it all around them, whether in Pitsmoor, Firvale and the other neighbourhoods of north-east Sheffield -or now in Tyendinaga. These worlds had two primary constituents. The first was the physical world of buildings, streets, houses, open places – whether referred to with pride, condemnation or critical insight, seen with fear or love, vandalised or beautified. The other was the life within; the people who lived there, those who sought to humanise the material world – and their continuous impact upon each other.

From anthologies of poetry published at Earl Marshal Comprehensive School, Firvale, during the early nineties: *Valley of Words* [4] and *Heart of Sheffield* [5], I distributed and read out loud a number of these Firvale and Pitsmoor poems. Here was Sajida's poem, *Firvale:*

I was lying in my bed
And I was looking at a book
that I just read.
It was a about a very nice place called Firvale-

Well, according to the book, anyway!
It was so different from the real Firvale,
It had clean and tidy roads,
No smashed windows covered with boards.
There wasn't any litter
And everyone was much, much fitter.
Children were playing
Their parents were praying –
Then I thought about the real Firvale
And litter on the streets,
Parks without any seats,
People being called racist names
And no children playing any games.
What kind of place is this?
It's a place you can never miss!

and I followed this with Fozya's poem, *Pitsmoor*:

I am Pitsmoor
where there is robbery
I am Pitsmoor
where there is burglary
Burnt cars here
Broken windows there.
I am Pitsmoor
where there is violence
I am Pitsmoor
where there are people
ruining our environment
being racist there
broken bottles there.
I am Pitsmoor
where people shout
'black people should get lost!
and so should women!'
I am Pitsmoor
that has a heart too.

Jabar's poem was much more about that beating heart:

Strong in their Mind

I was born in Sheffield
I've lived here for fourteen years.
You only see violence in one blue moon
But you see happy faces everywhere.

You see a line of different races
Waiting in the post office.
You see people at the bus stop,
Every one has a happy face –
Some ready to work
some going shopping.
Some arguments here and there
Some robbers here and there.
Police come, all the community gets together.
I live in Firvale.
Some Arabic, some white –
we all mix together.
I see people going to church
going to Mosque
There's a sign that says
'There's a jumble sale on Saturday'.
I see different faces and races
And they're all strong in their mind.

And Farzana's reflective poem, *A Park in Pitsmoor* sought to find some moments of peace and tranquil thought in one of her neighbourhood's few quieter places:

There are times when you get fed up,
When you go through the park
And all you want to see is the dark.
I wish people would care and sit up
And notice the mud and the muck.
It makes it impossible to look.
Not only me, but everyone
wants to see a flower
And a waterfall like a shower.
I wish they would plant some in the Spring,
Then look at the happiness they would bring.
I'd love to hear the birds
And try to understand their words.
And after you're had a tough day
And your legs feel as if they've gone,
It'd be good to see a bench
Where you can always sit on.
To keep the children happy
Why can't they have some swings and slides?
They'd be happy, there on the rides.
Somewhere in the walls I can hear a voice
but it's not loud,
It says 'One day, one day you'll feel proud'.
But when, when will be the date?

I wish it's tomorrow, or the day after.
But one thing I hope
Is that it's not too late.

Raksana and Nazia combined to write about their street, rendering it a human voice and sensitivity – and becoming it in a poetic act of unusual empathy:

The Street that No-one Cares About

I am the street of Idsworth Road,
I am the street which has got broken bottles on it,
I am the street that has a pub on it,
I am the street where muggers hang about,
I am the street where people shout
I am the street where dogs bark,
I am the street of troubled people,
I am the street of Idsworth Road.
I am like a prisoner
People dump things on me
They don't know I have a life.
I can feel the children play on me
I can feel the heat of the sun
I can feel the pain
When glass bottles are smashed on me.
I am the street of Idsworth Road.

Poems such as these made a strong impression on the Tyendinaga children. Some of them commented that they thought that poetry was not like this, but should be a 'cleaner' way of writing. Its subject matter should be about prettier or more fantastical things. They had not been introduced to its dimension of social realism or verisimilitude. Others had no idea that England could be so. Some Mohawks still saw England as the Crown and protector, festooned within the colonial propaganda that it was always the source of things just and fair. How could there be such places as Pitsmoor in England, with its urban desperation, violence and vandalism – and where so many young people were not white and had such 'un-English' names? The territory had lived through two resolutely Christian and Anglican centuries and sentimental contacts with the British royal family – and union jacks were still to be found flying from houses and gardens. So suddenly, here was a very different and surprising perspective arising from these young Pakistani-Sheffield poets, and one not present in the Mohawk children's conventional impressions of this faraway and royal land. Thus in a similar way that the Pitsmoor poems had the effect of stripping away illusions about the Sheffield children's part of their city- the streets and estates where they lived, they also demonstrated to the Tyendinaga

children how poetry could be a means of clearing the mind and perceptions of deception and falsity, cutting below the surfaces and setting down a true picture and meanings both about the place where you live and the people who live there with you.

So how did the Tyendinaga children respond? They began in quietness and concentration to write about their own world, so different yet so similar to that of the children a continent and ocean away who had provoked them. Dani, for example, wrote a portrait of the 'Rez' that was affirmative, even endearing about its people, yet with a subliminal critical view:

The Rez

The Rez is a wonderful place
Birds sing so beautifully in the morning,
All day long
People work hard for their money
And children read and write very well.
But there is a down side
There are drugs and alcohol,
There are cigarettes and bullies
And being bullied by a native kid
is worse than anything
You didn't want to be here three months ago
Before we got help
There is a man called Jagar, or Dave
as we all know him,
He taught us that way
Was the wrong way to go.
Now we're getting better at it
The streets are more peaceful and quiet
The skies are blue
The clouds are clean
And we're even got flowers growing
The Rez is a wonderful place,
Birds sing so beautifully in the morning
All day long,
People work hard for their money
And children read and write very well.
I'd love it to stay this way,
But it won't, I know it won't

Several students wrote about their 'subdivision', a new neighbourhood where, despite appearances, problems lurk behind a deceptive front. This is Cassandra's poem.

Living in the Subdivision

Living in the subdivision, you look around,
at first everything seems quiet, no-one makes a sound,
everything seems clean until you look down
and see scattered trash all over the ground.
At night while most people are sleeping
trouble emerges as the druggies start creeping,
keeping a low profile, leaving when the lost child
starts weeping.
Across the street there's a robbery
depending on reputation, everyone starts asking me
they play mind games, this isn't how they're supposed to be.
Rumours, gossip, manipulating and more
Sometimes I think these people don't know what
they are living for,
arguing and fighting, around here backstabbing
is so hardcore.
Some people say here is beautiful, others say it sucks,
don't be fooled by the views, or people who
try acting tough,
they get scared when someone comes along
who's just as rough
then there's the innocent who dare not strut their
stuff,
certain instigators get people saying they've
'had enough'.
Living in the subdivision, you've got to be half-happy,
half sad
this part of the reservation is part good and half bad,
sometimes I wanna scream, it gets me so mad.

Shyanze stressed the strong family and community bonds within which she lived and thrived:

Tyendinaga is my home
the same to many others,
I am never alone
We're all like sisters and brothers.
My home is fun and and caring
Everyone is welcomed.
My next door neighbour is my uncle
but so is the guy across the street.
My people like to hunt and fish
So that is what we do.
We're always farming and taking care

and we plant trees too.
Our community is full of light
although sometimes we fight.
We sleep at night with no fear
because our creator is near.
Grandmother Moon watches us at night
Grandfather Sun is watching in the day,
in much height.
There are multiple drugs, and alcoholic drinks
are many,
but still, Tyendinaga's people are good.

Other poets sought to emulate the Pitsmoor children's efforts to empathise with the place where they lived – to become it though their imaginations. Thus *I am Pitsmoor* became *I am Tyendinaga* for Stephanie:

I am Tyendinaga
where it's noisy,
where birds come and go,.
I am Tyendinaga
where it's full of trash.
No one takes care of me
I feel sad, full of pity.
I am Tyendinaga
where flowers bloom
where sunrises and sunsets begin
where the sky is pure blue
I am Tyendinaga
where the sun shines bright

and for Devon too, who wrote:

I am Tyendinaga
I am the one where you find many things
I am the one where you find drugs
I am the one where you find vandalism
I am the one where you find poorness.
But I'm also the one where you'll find a heart
I am the one where you'll find love
I am the one where you'll find a home
I'm the one.

While Jordan attested other hazards in his poem *Tyendinaga*, and a will to resist and defy them:

I am quiet
I speak, talk and shout but soon silenced I am.
I was once great, filled with pride and glee

Now I have been spoiled with carelessness
and procrastination
That all have displayed.
My heart and blood
The rivers, lakes, the creeks and ponds,
It's all the same,
Filled with garbage and put away to shame.
They never clean me to show that they care,
Just putting down garbage and poisoning me more.
I cry for help without any success
Putting more trash on me, I'm wasting away.
Though some are wicked, tainted with malice
I will never give in, surrender I will not!
They say many things, most are lies,
Maybe I'm wrong, maybe I'm right
The one thing I know, there will be a fight.

Eli used this 'Pitsmoor' form to set down issues of conflict and racism over hunting and fishing rights with those outside the reservation:

I am Tyendinaga
A river flows on my back
People hunt and fish
Like we should
I feel the animals
Long green grass,
where only a couple of people have been.
There's lots of racism
when the people fish off my back.
There's lots of protesting
to try to get our rights back.
Sometimes it's handled well
Other times cops and swat teams are there.
When people protest off my back
I can protect them the best I can
When they're on my back.

Ryan extended the idea of Tyendinaga's world 'on my back' to reflections of the indigenous Mohawk creation story of the world beginning from a woman's making on the shell of a turtle. This was expressed as a proud mural from ceiling to floor along the school's main corridor outside his classroom. He continues by telling of the conquest and desecration of this world by European powers, and his poem takes on a critical/historical perspective as the turtle becomes the narrator and griot of his people's, and much of the world's, oppressions and struggles:

I am Turtle Island
I am Turtle Island, I'm long and wide
I used to be free of garbage, drugs, rubble
and turmoil,
We did not know of war before Europe
sailed across
French, British and Americans fought over
land that was free.
For First Nations that land could not be owned
They fought over it like it was a small piece
of gold,
Up to this very day they fight over it.
They put First Nations on small reservations
And gave us a bad name.
I'm now very littered, drugs are all over my back.
They've made names for different part
of my back
Like Canada and the United States
And the different towns and cities.
There's wars, drugs, disease, death and prisons,
Nothing is good any more.
Sometimes I wish that Europe never
crossed the water,
Maybe then my back could be way
more clean.

Ryan's powerful poem held within it centuries of invasion, colonization, apartheid and struggle: the theft of the lands of the indigenous American peoples, the imposition of the reservation system; the creation of frontiers and external political entities across their territories; the despoliation of their lands and the attempts to destroy their reputation and culture; the introduction by European settlement previously unknown of deadly diseases, drugs and environmental catastrophe. The aboriginal writer Keith Matthews declared: 'Non-native Canadians don't understand the sordid, hidden history of Canada'.[6] But Ryan does. All this is condensed into a poem by a 14-year-old Mohawk boy, using the legends and stories of his own ancestors, inspired to write poetry by a group of Pakistani Sheffielders a continent and an ocean away, now living in the land of their original colonizers. Such is the power of poetry as a messenger and lever.

If *I am Turtle Island* condensedly invoked such stories from history, a poem by another Pitsmoor schoolgirl about her grandmother became the inspiration of a series of Mohawk children's' very personal poems about their own elders and parents. In 1992, Zaibun had written this poem about her grandmother:

My Grandmother

When I think about my grandmother
I get tears in my eyes.
I remember when she used to tell me off,
Not to point.
She used to say, 'Don't you do that,
It's very rude'.
I used to ignore her
and cry, cry and cry.
She used to get mad
and so did I,
She used to hug me
and cry.
Now I think, oh!
Why did I make her cry?
And I feel very sorry for her
And I don't ignore her now.
She was tall, thin
and had had long, long hair
with a beautiful face
and small feet –
Oh! I do think about her!

It moved the Tyendinaga children in 2005 with its memories of love and loss more than any other which we read and studied, and provoked some strong responses. Nine-year-old Kayla wrote immediately:

Me and My Grandmother

Me and my grandmother
used to go to pow-wow together.
But now we don't
because she passed away
not too long ago.
I used to native dance for her
in my leather dress
with my jewelry.
I danced
many different dances,
she loved it
when I danced
for her.
I miss those times.

while Keenan remembered dramatic and happy fishing times with his grandfather:

My Grandfather

My grandfather and I went fishing.
One day
we caught some big ones
some small ones.
Some were pickerel, and some were pike.
Then suddenly I got a really big bite
My grandfather said, 'reel fast!!!'
When I got it in
It was a huge sheephead!!!
So I started to yell
'can we eat it?
can we eat it?'
Then my grandfather said
'No, it has too many bones' –
so we started to fish again.

Dakota remembered exhilarating fishing forays with his mother, this time by the traditional method of spearing in the fast-flowing waters that run into the Bay of Quinte:

Spearing with My Mum

Spearing is fun
Spearing is neat,
I like it because you get lots of meat.
I think spearing is a treat,
You don't even know when the fish are coming
But when they do, spear them too!
I go spearing with my mum
I think spearing is lots of fun!

Some poems of family expressed a certain sadness along with pride in absent fathers, working for long periods away from the reservation. Two boys wrote about their ironworker fathers:

My Dad the Ironworker

My Dad works all over the place
He works all different parts of Canada and America
My Dad is an iron worker.

He works on a lot of cool buildings
like the Detroit Tigers' stadium
I never really get to see him
only on weekends
When he is home we have lots of
Good and bad times –
That's my Dad, the Native Ironworker.

High and Mighty

I wish to be an ironworker,
build a building so high and tall.
I would be king of the world,
So high and mighty, yet peaceful.
And quiet, I'm not afraid of heights,
and I live for dangerous things.
From atop the high towers
people look like ants, itty-bitty and small.
What a great job to be high and mighty!

And Stephanie wrote about her trucker father, so often away:

My Dad

Nine years ago my dad was a truck driver
Oh now I missed him on his long trips to the States.
Mostly, we never had any time to spend together,
I missed him a lot.
He was gone for a week or two
We couldn't even play ball hockey or catch or soccer.
I felt lonely at times
I always looked at the windows
Waiting for him to come home.
Now he has a new job
Now I don't have to wait or worry anymore.

And John's poem of his father is more about the man who gave him his haircut – proudly and exquisitely in the Mohawk style:

When my Dad gives me a haircut
he asks me to sit in a chair
and he puts a towel on me.
He uses a razor to cut my hair,
he makes it so it looks like a Mohawk.
He cuts both sides

and in the middle there is hair.
When it gets too long
he cuts it to a Mohawk again.
Sometimes it hurts
Sometimes I didn't hurt
but it makes my eyeballs fall out.

A subliminal text to these poems were the national statistics concerning young aboriginal people in Canada: the strongly disproportionate levels of alcoholism – including fetal alcohol syndrome, of school drop-outs, of drug addiction, of youth suicides. Two poems by Kayla and Lacy offered a sense of optimism and tenacity from the heat of these prevailing oppressions, with Lacy still employing the 'first person' method he had read in the Pitsmoor poems. First, Kayla:

Never Give Up

Life has lots of ups and downs
Lots of smiles and frowns
Lot of straight and rough edges
but you should never give up.
Suicide is not the only way out,
problems come both good and bad,
but don't give up, don't be so sad.
Just make the best of what you have
and love life good or bad.

then Lacy:

I am the world
the world that could be a better place.
I am the world
the world with kids at the age of seven swearing,
and taking control of their parents.
I am the world
the world with fourteen year-old young
women getting pregnant.
I am the world
the world that has violence
the world that has to change
hoping soon the war is over
and people stop doing bad habits
and getting an education.
I am the world that hopefully changes soon.

Who knows, not I certainly, the meanings laden within the word 'nice' when used by these children? Few other words have held so many levels of ambiguity

and adaptation. In her *Poems are Nice*, Shannon's insights seem to be acknowledging the knowing powers of poetical and critical knowledge, while also understanding not only what is to be learned from poems written by fellow thirteen year-olds in north-east Sheffield, England – but what also is to be gleaned from the words inside herself. 'People's lives', ordinary people's hopes, criticisms and solidarity; what they have experienced and what they experience now: from Pitsmoor to Tyendinaga, from Pakistan and Yorkshire to Canada, and all the other small and large places in our world, for what else was poetry over conceived and written?

Poems are Nice

Poems are nice
they tell about people's
lives.
Poems help you understand
that things aint nice,
Poems tell you
what people have been
through,
and what they are going
through,
Poems are nice.

References

[1] See the author's books: *Classrooms of Resistance* (Writers and Readers, London, 1976), *The World in a Classroom* (Writers and Readers, London, 1976), *Living Community, Living School* (Tufnell Press, London, 1996) and *None But Our Words: Critical Literacy in Classroom and Community* (Open University Press, Buckingham, 1998).

[2] Searle, Chris (Ed.)(1989) *One for Blair: an anthology of poems for young people.* London: Young World Books.

[3] Iqbal, Ara & Van Riel (1990) *Just for Five Years: reminiscences of Pakistani senior citizens in Sheffield.* Sheffield: Sheffield City Libraries.

[4] Searle, Chris (Ed.)(1993) *Valley of Words.* Sheffield: Earl Marshal School.

[5] Searle, Chris (Ed.)(1995) *Heart of Sheffield.* Sheffield: Earl Marshal School.

[6] 'Closing Comment' by Keith Matthews, *Aboriginaltimes,* Ottawa, October 2000.

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