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ABSTRACT

In Tom Wayman's poem *Did I Miss Anything?*, the poet-teacher offers a series of responses to the above question, posed by a student unaware of the always contextual nature of learning. The poet replies: "Nothing" and "Everything." In the course of this paper, I use this poem as a prompt, approaching the tensions held in these words not as a chuckle at the student's expense, but instead, as a humorous challenge that revisions the question of what is at stake in the educational act, and as an absurd gesturing into the boundaries of what the possibilities of teaching might be.

Did I Miss Anything? (Tom Wayman)

Question frequently asked by students after missing a class

Nothing. When we realized you weren't here we sat with our hands folded on our desks in silence, for the full two hours

> Everything. I gave an exam worth 40 per cent of the grade for this term and assigned some reading due today on which I'm about to hand out a quiz worth 50 per cent

Nothing. None of the content of this course has value or meaning Take as many days off as you like: any activities we undertake as a class I assure you will not matter either to you or me and are without purpose

> Everything. A few minutes after we began last time a shaft of light descended and an angel or other heavenly being appeared and revealed to us what each woman or man must do to attain divine wisdom in this life and the hereafter This is the last time the class will meet before we disperse to bring this good news to all people on earth

Nothing. When you are not present how could something significant occur?

Everything. Contained in this classroom is a microcosm of human existence assembled for you to query and examine and ponder This is not the only place such an opportunity has been gathered

but it was one place

And you weren't here

The Extremes of Nothing and Everything

n responding poetically to the frequent query of his students, "*Did I miss any-thing?*," Tom Wayman sets up a pedagogic situation of extremes, which admits of the possibility that contradiction and vacillation are both primary and necessary to the educational act itself. He tells his students "Nothing." He tells his students "Everything." An impossible demand is placed on the teacher when asked to provide

an exact account of what happens in her classroom, of what the movements of learning really and finally add up to, of what transpires irregardless of ambiguity. Such impossible demands decree impossible solutions, and in fact, Tom Wayman answers the only way he can: both impossibly and nonsensically. In the course of this paper, I use Tom Wayman's poem as a prompt and as a space of inquiry into theoretical thought, approaching the tension and juxtaposition held in his words not just as a simple reproach, nor as a slight demeaning chuckle at the student's expense, but instead, as a humorous challenge that revisions the question of what is at stake in the interminable movements of learning, and also, as an absurd gesturing into the boundaries of what the possibilities of teaching might be.

In regards to his role as poet, Wayman (1993a) declares one of his main objectives to be that of "demystify[ing] the world," through the deployment of words that accurately reflect a speaker's lived experiences, and of "speaking with the utmost clarity" (p. 10), thus illuminating the contradictions of existence not so much as to further confuse the field, but to "render the text habitable" (de Certeau, 1984, p. xxi), to render classroom dialogue meaningful, and educational experience touchable. To tell students they missed *everything* and *nothing* is to share with them the fact that human experience consists of neither, or perhaps both, and that knowledge itself is an often-incongruous construct, for and from which they must forever interpret and glean meaning for themselves.

"A Literature at the Edge of Work"

Tom Wayman is a Canadian poet concerned with the lives and everyday experiences of working people and how they come to be represented in art whether their representations belong to them or not. As an advocate of the proliferation of what he titles the "new work writing," Wayman endorses an art of and for labour, which strives to realistically represent human relations in the social world of work. Unlike the efforts of the solitary artist set apart, who writes not about him or herself but on the work of others, this "new work writing" is a performance of selfrepresentation, and is actually a language constructed by those directly involved in the illustrated conditions: the workers, the teachers, the unemployed. Not setting out to embellish and glorify working life, but to appreciate the central—and sometimes contradictory—role work plays in the construction of human subjectivities (and life itself), and the complicated nature of the relationships we have while working, and toward our work—we often both love it and hate it, look forward to it while also despising its inevitability—Wayman argues that "because the central experience of daily life is still almost everywhere missing" in poetic representation (1983, p. 24), poetry is often revered as something untouchable, eternal, and immaterial. It is from against this lack that he deliberates on "a literature at the edge of work" (1983, p. 62), one that can take into account, and spring forth from, the actual needs and desires of working men and women, and to firmly claim these lives as both important and worthy of poetic appellation, "as creative producers rather than as passive recipients of information and skills" (Low, 2008a, p. 145).

In the context of education, Wayman also sees a lack of correspondence between the inevitable vicissitudes of the everyday—where students live multifariously confusing and complicated social realities, both inside and outside of school and the types of literature studied in classrooms, typically taken up through abstract and intangible means. Wayman writes of the chronic squandering of poetry's potential, in its unfortunate though familiar function as a storehouse for the mappings of literary technique, memorization, and rote skill, what he calls "an instrument of torture in mass public education" (Wayman, 1993a, p. 171). He also criticizes the proliferation of attitudes that position the poet as part of a privileged literary elite, as a dealer in "esoteric mysteries," as opposed to the material particulars of life (p. 171). "Put another way," Wayman (1983) notes, both in the context of school and labour, "we learn that serious literature consists of overwritten escape books" (p. 15).

Of great consequence to Wayman, then, is what Bronwen Low (2008b) refers to as "a dynamic poetics of the moment" (p. 120), one that hardly regards itself as extraordinary, immutable or resistant to change, but instead, as fundamentally malleable, and, in its very nature as a flexible form, also accurate in its representation of the human condition. The question, therefore, that must be posed in the context of the poem at hand, is: What does an accurate representation of teaching look like? Who measures, justifies, and defines such accuracy? Is it a linear narrative of heroic feats and identifiable ends, "as if the time of education could set precisely the time of learning" (Britzman, 1998, p. 4), or is it something more stumbling, more incoherent, and in its essence as something altogether indecipherable, more imperfectly human and humorous? Is its measure obvious and straightforward? Or is it inherently contradictory, at once sarcastic *and* serious, bitter and hostile *while also* compassionate and tender? For myself, and from the deep-rooted uncertainty that I take to be the true story of education, Wayman's poem points to the tensions of teaching—as played out in the classroom—and to the actual weight that rests on its hinges: the doubts, the disenchantments, the unmet expectations, the skewed realities, but also the utter joy, the shocking and sometimes beautiful spontaneity, and the inevitable meeting of curriculum worlds.

A Landscape of Folded Curriculum

In the alternating indented stanzas of Wayman's poem there is a volatile sense of performative irresolution and fracture. The inconsistent and imaginary response is one of juggling alternatives, though since neither of them is genuinely valid—in that the totalizing nature of the everything and the nothing negates an explicit claim to reality and points, instead, only to fallacy and fantasy—and there are no direct demands placed on the student to choose, there is actually an alternative left unspoken, though insinuating itself interstitially in the stanza breaks. It is almost as if the explicit tone of mockery in the poem, a tone that dissipates yet is felt most forcefully on the first reading, is a means to make the reader vulnerable and exposed; to ridicule, shame, and embarrass. Yet in the solemn nature of the poem's end—"but it was one place and you weren't here"-the derisive tone is shown to have no substance, no affective staying power, and so actually empowers the reader to take a step back and consider her choices, to pillage and plunder in the shadowy echoes of textual silence. It is here that Canadian curriculum theorist Ted Aoki's notion of the folded curriculum of educational experience, a zone of tension in between the lived and the planned, can best be sounded out.

For Aoki, the pedagogical situation is never one of strict correspondence, but consists instead of a forever negotiated "living in tensionality" (2005d, p. 159), as teachers and students find themselves indwelling, sometimes precariously, in between at least two separate spheres of curriculum demands, which themselves passionately resist integration. The first is that of the preplanned, instrumental understandings of the curriculum landscape, which operate in a "fiction of sameness," and wherein "teachers are asked to be doers" (2005d, p. 160). This is the "curriculum-asplan," the bureaucratic sphere of government documents; predetermined empirical applications that generally assume certainty and stability, and a linear trajectory from beginning to end. Apart from this exceedingly normative framework, though, there is the mode of curricular being that can only be articulated in the ambiguous potential of classroom experience and embodied relationality. Referred to as the "curriculum-as-lived," this situated curriculum consists of the unpredictable, the improvised, the "unplanned and unplannable" (2005b, p. 322). Teachers, however, cannot choose

definitively only one curriculum field over the other, and must forever reconcile themselves and their material situations anew, acknowledging the tension that comes from "living simultaneously with limitations and with openness, but also that this openness harbours within it risks and possibilities as we quest for a change from the is to the not yet" (2005d, p. 164).

When presented with the question of understanding what teaching and learning is, we are presented with what Aoki terms a "hermeneutic problem of the relationship between the general and the particular" (Aoki, 2005e, p. 155), between the mandated and the lived. To think of teaching instrumentally, and only as an abstract "application," is to ignore the fusion of horizons, the meeting of worlds, which determines classroom experience. For "what the situation demands must not be ignored" (2005e, p. 155), and in Aoki's view, for the situation of pedagogy to be understood properly it must be understood in its forever fluctuating relationality, and at every moment in a new and different way, in "a tension between the appearance that presents immediately to us and that which needs to be revealed" (2005e, p. 156).

Aoki's approach to bilingualism can also help us to further appreciate this pressing questioning of relation. To venture conceptually into the sphere of a second language is not here put forward as a technical task of appropriating a linguistic code, but is viewed as a circular endeavour of "being-and-becoming-in the world"; to "belong to two worlds at once and yet not belong to either completely" (2005a, p. 243). The practice of being bilingual is thus to stand in a dialogic dialectic, of questioning between the known and the unknown, and with "an understanding of education as a leading out and a going beyond" (2005a, p. 245), a position that is often ambiguous and difficult, and necessarily branches into the sphere of unknown possibility. Aoki's understanding of the layering and forever-folded sedimentation in "the architectonics of the curriculum landscape" (2005c, p. 201), like the inarticulable in Wayman's poem, insinuates the possibility of a pedagogical alternative necessarily steeped in a lack of consistency and totality, and what is more, an alternative that actually characterizes the majority of human experience: doubled over and lost, in between the extremes of *nothing* and *everything*.

A Rhetoric of Walking in Words

If one can imagine the reader of the poem as staging a travel, where the printed words point to familiar notations and routes, and the blank spaces indicate districts not normally frequented, notes not normally sounded—like sleepy, stuttering statues, and long barren wheat fields—then we can think of reading as a walking out and a shifting speculation, as a rambling "space of enunciation" (de Certeau, 1984, p. 98). In Michel de Certeau's account of the steps we take when walking in the city, there is an elocutionary rhetoric to the inscriptions we invariably stage. Left foot, right foot, left foot, right foot, page one, page two, page three, and so on, but "everything else is of an unlimited diversity," and cannot be simply "reduced to their graphic trail" (p. 99). While the body of the reader steps out indefinitely, it creates value by staking a pause and changing direction, then shifting with the rhythms of the wind and the moment to manage a trajectory of movement that is never foreseeable. In this way, the walker, in his or her "long poem of walking" (p. 99), takes and engages the space that is given, along with the roads, the alleys, the sentence breaks, the fields, the margins, the ocean, and manipulates such intersections to suit her fancy, linking diverse places in his/her stride. This movement skilfully secretes out of spatial organization the normally unseen and unsaid, the "shadows and ambiguities within them" (p. 99). As spaces of enunciation, they must be walked in to be written, and likewise with reading Wayman's poem; "by an art of being in between" (p. 30), and in questioning the spaces framing the stanza, the reader can always draw unanticipated storylines over and through the ones already assumed written. As with the curriculum lived into existence in the classroom, a "travel story" in its own right—where bridges are built over frontiers, and where the student and teacher face each other every instance anew, inventing and transforming from within the demands of the situation at hand—there is also in the gathering of reading an act of privileging, a transformation, and a necessary abandonment. What is more, there is an understanding in this further folding of experience that "plurality is originary" (p. 133), and that claims to natural unity and order—in literature as well as education—are but semblances of an illusory formality that have no basis in reality, a brutal masking and a covering over of "the murmuring of everyday practices" (p. 200).

But how, then, does Wayman's poem function to bring together, in its humour, in its shrug-of-the-shoulders abandonment, an articulation of teaching that refuses to engage one extreme at the absolute expense of the other? And moreover, that manages to trust in the spaces between the words, where bodies and languages touch? For Cynthia Chambers et al. (2008), the practice of métissage, in modes of living as well as writing, offers a starting point. In this understanding, métissage—which is both a theoretical outlook and a praxis of politics, reading, writing and research— "carries the ability to transform," and through its encouragement of an always presumed mixing of perspectives and voice, it "opposes transparency and has the power to undo logic and the clarity of concepts" (p. 141). This idea is not unlike what Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) refers to as *heteroglossia*, the integration of, "*another's speech in another's language*" (p. 324, emphasis in original). When put into service, the work of métissage functions as a sustained and collaborative collage between different and differently sounded voices, knotting together seemingly disparate fragments into a narrative braid "that highlights difference ... without essentializing or erasing it, while simultaneously locating points of affinity" (Chambers et al., p. 142). In Awad Ibrahim's (2009) situating of métissage as a significant cultural practice in Hip-Hop communities, this way of approaching the world, this methodology of language and identity, supports dialogue among multiple "entities that are equally valorized; hence it is an egalitarian hybridity, where ambiguity, multiplicity, fragmentation and plurality become the new landscape" (p. 233).

As I have touched on elsewhere (Lewkowich, 2010), the innovative tactics of reading that poetry encourages plays out a fracture at the moment of performance. This "moment" is likewise remade in each reading, though regardless of where it is played out, the perspectives of a dynamic and lived poetics are forever split at their core. As the reader peers into the grainy fog and poaches, making interpretive choices out of shadows, poetry can also function as an interruption that skews and disrupts; and thus the strange and solemn grammar in Wayman's ending—"but it was one place and you weren't here"—can be retold and retooled, as a persistent pointing to the meaning of the present re-imagined through the mention of a past absence; as this is another place and you are here.

Of Humour and Leaky Bodies

In many ways, Wayman's poem functions as one big joke. As Margrit Shildrick (1997) writes of "leaky bodies," in the context of bioethics, and of the always unstable materiality of embodied selves, I wonder if "bodies" of humorous writing can also be said to puncture the "bodies" of readers, prompting a "leaky" relation at the very point where affect emerges and is felt. But what does this leaking imply? Wayman, in his view that "jokes remain a major way the human race gains perspective about its difficulties" (1993a, p. 148), engages the function of humour as a necessary relation in his poetry, which sets out to articulate life as it is lived on the ground.

In the representation of everyday human experience, sometimes banal and absurd yet always relationally driven, a touchstone that Wayman proposes is that of asking: "Is there any humour?" (1983, p. 47). In his critique of the emotionless anonymity of much of the art produced in the name of Social Realism, with its often inflexibly stolid and grandiose temperament, Wayman argues that because of the position that such artists effectively assume, as exterior to the work they render visually or poetically, they are "in no position to understand what is *particularly* absurd or unusual in the situation being presented. He or she literally doesn't get the joke" (1983, p. 47).

So what does it mean, then, to get the joke? Above all, the joke in Wayman's poem functions as a provocation that unsettles previously established curricular worlds, and is thus a jab at the taken-for-granted. Teaching and learning are here ultimately proposed as intensely contextual activities, non-instrumentalizable, and meaningless without human relation. As Judith Robertson (2006) tells us, "Recovering education as provocation invites us to view it as something dynamic and unfrozen" (p. 175). And like the wayward chips of an iceberg behemoth, floating up on the Atlantic shore, the leakage in the melting "unfrozen" always carries with it "odd hauntings [that] interfere with conscious attitudes" (Britzman, 1998, p. 8), inspiring pronouncements of sometimes mumbled motivations that lie lodged in "the fault lines of [our] inattention" (p. 10). Speaking of the rhythms of the ocean, it is important to remember the precarious nature of the shifting seashore space between the high and low tide marks, referred to in Newfoundland and Labrador as "the landwash." And though an activity easily maligned and ignored (Guy, 1975), trolling in this space of adventure, danger, and reprieve can also allow us to recover previously dormant and often marginalized aspirations (Lewkowich, 2009). The joke functions in a similar way, bouncing the body uncontrollably in stifled snickers, gleeful gasps and sometimes teary vision.

Roland Barthes (1974) describes the vociferous pluralities inherent in literature as "arts of noise," and that "what the reader consumes is [a] defect in communication, [a] deficient message" (p. 145), where deficiency means not so much a lack of meaning, but a lack of correspondence. The joke adds weight to this deficiency, as what the laugh represents—whether as a stifle or as a boom—is precisely a performative excess of meaning that cannot be contained in language. For Shoshana Felman (2007), "Humour ... is pre-eminently not a 'saying' but a 'doing': a making [someone] laugh" (p. 118). In this way, the performance of the joke "is not simply [an] act of provoking laughter, but also that of tripping," and while such stumbling may be pleasurable in the pause it provides, "it is also, and especially, a subversive act" (p. 123). When Felman writes of "the residual smile of humour" (p. 131), and of laughter as "a sort of explosion of the speaking body" (p. 124), I am reminded of what Wayman refers to as "the ghosts of rejected possibilities [that] haunt the choices we have made or have been imposed upon us" (2007, p. 9). From this, I wonder if in reading Wayman's poem as a joke, we can harness the explosions that leak as a non-language of laughter from our speaking bodies, a pedagogical ammunition that, in its necessary lack of a center, has the power to break down and question inadequate borders and boundaries.

A Welcoming to the Boundary

Assuming, then, that conceptual categories necessarily bleed, what we might sometimes see as the dividing line, or the frontier—of an idea, a person, a word, an educational act—may serve more as a relational link than a testimony of simple separation, since "the points of differentiation between two bodies are also their common points" (de Certeau, 1984, p. 127). On this question Deborah Britzman (1998) argues that, "Education is best considered as a frontier concept: something between the teacher and the student, something yet to become" (p. 4), and so the felt impact of "crossing over" is also forever a revealing and a surfacing; for "within the frontier, the alien is already there ... a disquieting familiarity" (de Certeau, p. 129). The frontier between the *everything* and the *nothing* in education then stands not as an absolute, but as a spinning and dizzying pivot that must forever be re-negotiated, acting both as center and as distraction. Awareness of the authority, danger, and possibility of such limits is also of interest to Wayman, as he remains "intrigued by the location in space and time where love first manifests itself, or crosses into obsession, or dissipates" (2007, p. 9).

Since I have admittedly drawn to a crisis the scope of the tension in Wayman's poem, and purposely amplified the gap that arises between the *everything* and the *nothing*, it is important to recall the utter materiality and practicality that Wayman himself attributes to his poetic task. As he declares, "Clarity, honesty, [and] accuracy of statement have been my goals," and moreover, "the complexities revealed by my poems should be the complications of our everyday existence, rather than newly-created difficulties" (1993b, p. 12). However, these *complications of our everyday existence* are no straightforward matter, and were we to assign to them a simplicity and undeserved tranquility, we would only be doing a disservice to the demonstrably unsure and always emergent nature of all human experience. So, though Wayman envisions his poetry as "a tender, humorous, enraged, piercing, but

always accurate depiction of where we are" (p. 12), as his readers, we must always bear in mind that *where we are* is never only one place, and since "there is [always] more to the story than the story" (Doyle, 2006, p. 96), being "accurate" does not only involve an adherence to basic material description, but is also a matter of pointing to the degrees of difference, contradiction, and relationality that inhere in our material worlds.

Held within the *everything* and the *nothing* of Wayman's poem is a joke that unsettles, but also says of education that the boundaries of teaching and learning are things to be touched and interrupted, and always to be moved through. As de Certeau (1984) reminds us, the narrative of human experience and learning is never one so ultimately delimitable; "What the map cuts up, the story cuts across" (p. 129). The question of *who* and *what* is the subject of education's learning, and the wondering of *where* and *when* such stories reside is, indirectly, the basis of the blow dealt in Wayman's response. In refusing to answer directly, he tosses the ball back to his students, and extends the possibility of a student's self-recognition made up in the educational moment of dialogue. Though this vagueness and obscurity prompts fear, anxiety, disrespect, shame, humour, fantasy, and indirection, these are scribbles inscribed then erased on a chalkboard; faint traces that form the remainder of the poetry of education's affect.

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