

## INDIGNATION, KNOWLEDGE, AND THAT TIME ON THE BUS

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Ana and I were en route when the disagreement happened.

In the throes of early friendship, we were mutually curious but neither of us wanted to appear overeager. We had spent the morning at Colégio Ceará: I had dutifully taken notes while Ana intermittently doodled and slept face down in her notebook. When Ana casually asked if I wanted to hang out that afternoon, I cancelled my plans and signed up to whatever she had in store. I tagged along to Ana's afterschool graphic design class and smiled conspiratorially when she whispered in English – to throw off the rest of her classmates – about how hot her teacher was. Now we were on a bus hurtling towards Shopping Benfica to gorge on fast food at the *praça de alimentação* (shopping centre food court).

I can't remember exactly how it started, what I said and how it all began to go wrong.

Many teachers at Colégio Ceará used indignation as a pedagogical tool, coaxing students' interest in their subjects with outrage-inducing tales that unmasked oppression, inequality, and other unethical practices. Professor Luzianne had brought the issue of abortion, recently legalized in the case of anencephaly, to essay-writing class. She played YouTube videos showing that babies born with anencephaly could live up to a year; that these children belonged to mothers, fathers, and families like any other. Professor Vitor controversially had told his Current Events class that he believed the right to abortion should be extended even further. According to him, Brazilian women were already having abortions at higher rates than any other country in the world. Why not legalize a practice that was already taking place and allow safe access to all women, not just the rich?

I became aware of my pulse, of seconds stretching, as the conversation started to turn.

While this pedagogy of the indignant garnered rapt attention from some students, it barely seemed to register with Ana. Ana was not like Carla who announced that, given all politicians were corrupt, she planned to 'vote blank', refusing to pick the best of a bad bunch. She was not like Larissa who engaged in earnest discussion about the government's responsibility to take care of *all* its people. Where she could have been angry about the number of times she had been robbed on the way to and from school, Ana was cool and detached. Still, I had caught flashes of indignation as Ana pointed out the girls in the class who used to be her friends, who had dropped her when it was confirmed that she liked girls.

Ana looked me in the eye as she launched her fury. How could I believe that it was acceptable for a mother to *kill* her own child? If a woman was willing to take a chance by having sex, shouldn't she be willing to face the consequences? Why should the baby be punished for the woman's behaviours? A mother would grow to love her baby.

I had inadvertently trampled on what Ana knew about women, mothers, sex, and gender.

This bus ride did not appear in my PhD thesis about emerging middle-class students in their final year at a private high school in Northeast Brazil. It sat unexamined, an unexcavated gut punch, until I brought it to Comoveras, the feminist experimental ethnographic writing collective composed of anthropologists based in Brazil, Scotland, and Uruguay. There, I found an audience who pushed me to write, to affect, and to write affect. Through this piece, I have sought to hint at the messiness of fieldwork and the role that affect plays in knowing and knowledge.

Relationships in the field are complicated, especially when you are a (so-called) adult doing deep hanging out with teenagers. Up to that moment on the bus, I might have imagined Ana as a sort-of adolescent double. She seemed to have her own anthropological detachment from the class, honed from her position as insider turned outsider. Then again, maybe Ana was my reverse. As a high school student, I would never have slept during class; nor would I have come out. Whatever Ana was, I believed that I had somehow fooled her into hanging out with the anthropologist and that this affective 'snap' (Stewart 2007) threatened to undo our relationship.

Righteous anger could not be brought out of Ana by teachers hoping to score attention and imprint knowledge during lectures on neoliberalism or the history of the slave trade. I cannot remember the provocation I issued, but Ana's understandings about life tumbled out in a morality-suffused glut of thinking/feeling that broke down carefully constructed enlightenment dichotomies. Ana knew because she felt. She felt because she knew.

I was 34 but now I am 41. Ana was 16 and now she is 23. She does not recall that moment on the bus. (She was not taking notes.) Her understandings of women, mothers, sex, and gender have changed. She recognizes herself as a kind of character in my ethnography but she tells me that, now, she's an entirely different person.

## References

Stewart, K., 2007. *Ordinary Affects*. Durham: Duke University Press.

## Acknowledgments

The author finalized the article using eye gaze technology, which she continues to use for her creative ethnographic work in progress: *What Happened: A Gossamer Project of Narrative and Other Speculations* (<https://speculationandnarrative.wordpress.com/>).