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INTERPRETING SOCIAL CHANGE

There is a photograph that made me, ME. It hoovered up my innocence as it captured the harrowing genesis of liberation. A red-letter date punctuating every calendar, every year.

Reading your article I had a few thoughts. I was on my own conformism-guaranteed assembly line to privileged adulthood, undergoing indoctrination at the austere hands of Calvinism – a diet of propaganda, seasoned with a pinch of anger and a drop of entitlement, simmering in racial resentment. The price of tribal baptism is high: fear-based allegiance, genuflecting to authority, regulated living and ersatz patriotism. It is a Faustian pact.

I however, refused to check my individualism, and join the queue. I declined the radicalization wrought by a white school, in a white neighborhood, in a white country in a white world. I dodged the Olympic-level platitude gymnastics and customary persecution paranoia, designed to dazzle doubters who refuse to piously nag WWJD? My internship in the white arts of selective humanity recognition, comprehensive invisibility of anyone 'other' and blatant denial of human rights, was rescinded. I was shunned. A Judas. And I felt tickety-boo.

During the convulsive years of Apartheid South Africa, schools conducted maniacal aptitude tests, ensuring that low scores convicted a jinxed testee to a life of menial work. The system didn't accommodate potential, improvement or false results. It scorned the detrimental influences of emotional disengagement, ineffective curricula or environmental variances. Schools conditioned kids to relentlessly self-cluster. Potential college kids would cotillion, but only with other high-scorers. Stigmatized scorers were invisible. As were degenerates.

Scoring at schools for black pupils was not applied, attendance was voluntary anyway.

The alternative: illiteracy. Black education served to enable the reading of directions on cleaning products, a useful skill in a career as servant to a white madam. An important skill, as accidental madam murdering, by confusing rat poison with saccharine, could send someone to the gallows.

Of all the mechanisms used by the education system, the *pièce de résistance* in a stuffed arsenal of stupidity was a project to write books for black students, highlighting culturally relevant stories, in the Afrikaans medium. *Afrikaans*. The language of colonial oppression and segregation.

But occasionally kids, like ones you describe – numbed, raw, and triggered – stand up, shedding childhood skin and instinctively commit acts of immense bravery. Like the Soweto kids who, on a cold day in 1976, rose up and protested against the Department of Black Education, rejecting the prescribed literature of humiliation.

On June 16, 1976, they woke up. Twenty thousand students protested a curriculum that denied them, by eroding their culture. While the world danced to ‘Silly Love Songs’ by Wings, the kids in Soweto vacated their classrooms and invaded the streets in protest. Seventy-six were killed. The outcome of compromised education in service of Orwellian government is captured in one image: Hector Pieterse’s lifeless body lies limp in the arms of Mbuyisa Ndlovu, after being shot by the South African Police Services. Ndlovu runs, carrying the fatally shot Pieterse in a futile attempt to save his life. Pieterse’s sister is alongside, her face wracked with pain. They are a *pietà* to all murdered children. Tamir Rice. Trayvon Martin. Emmett Till.

In pre-’94 South Africa, it required Herculean determination for black students to succeed. The system was a reduced version of Inglis’ ideal: a two-tier of submission and classification. Despite the odds, our elders, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, Bantu Steve Biko, Desmond Mpilo Tutu and many more did exactly what you advocate, dear Mr Gatto. They stopped being children. They claimed self-determination. They changed our world.



Student Activist, Hector Pieterse carried by Mbuyisa Makhubu photographed by Sam Nzima

“SA to Mark June 16 Soweto Uprising.” News24, 24.Com, 16 June 2015, www.news24.com/

SouthAfrica/News/SA-to-mark-June-16-Soweto-uprising-20150615.