

A REFLECTION ON WHITE-SEEMING PRIVILEGE THROUGH THE PROCESS OF *CURRERE*

By Adrian M. Downey¹

University of New Brunswick

In 2017, I wrote my master's thesis as an arts-informed autobiography examining the intersection of my own white privilege and Indigenous identity (Downey, 2017). Since that time, I've had many opportunities to continue reflecting on my Indigenous identity as my band, the Qalipu Mi'kmaw First Nation (QMFN), has gone through the process of removing me from its founding member list, and consequently, my name has been removed from the Federal Indian Registry.² I have also, more than once, come face to face with my own white privilege. In this article, I continue the process of examining the intersection of my white privilege and my Indigenous identity or, what I have called elsewhere, my white-seeming privilege (Downey, 2017, 2018a).³

White-seeming privilege is the term I give the privilege to which I have access. It is, for me, a way of complicating the commonly held binary construction of a white/non-white spectrum of privilege. *It is in no way a tempering of my privilege*, but rather a contextualization of the privilege to which I have access in my particular lived and ancestral history. This ultimately stems from the belief that we are more than the labels that society ascribes to us (i.e., "privileged" or "marginalized"). My white privilege is complicated by my contested and erased Indigenous identity: the privilege to which I have access is a direct result of my ancestors' assimilation and erasure; the privilege to which I have access comes with 20 years of not knowing myself as an Indigenous person; the privilege to which I have access comes with language and culture loss; the privilege to which I have access comes with a tenuous hold on a federally recognized Indigenous identity (See Footnote 2). A colleague recently asked, "what kind of privilege is that?" with reference to Indigenous peoples who have white privilege. My answer? A real but complicated one.

In this article, I revisit the intersection of my Indigenous identity and my white privilege through a form of *currere* (Pinar, 1994, 2012). I understand *currere* as a method of autobiography divided into four stages: the regressive, the progressive, the analytic, and the synthetic (Pinar, 1994, 2012). Each of these stages or moments has a particular task in helping one make sense of the self. The regressive looks to the past and the progressive to the future. The analytic and synthetic attempt to understand the present. Furthermore, *currere*, "provides a strategy for students of curriculum to study the relationship between academic knowledge and life history in the interest of self-understanding and social reconstruction" (Pinar, 2012, p. 44). For me, when we engage in reflective analysis and/or autobiography, we are ultimately attempting to make sense of who we are, where we come from, why we are here, and where we are going—four questions often posed by Indigenous Elders and knowledge keepers to encourage folk to place their own lives within a larger context (Marshall, 2018; see also Talaga, 2018). To me, there is considerable similarity between Pinar's *currere* and these questions. Thus, below, I frame my reflective autobiography dualistically as *currere* informed by Indigenous (Mi'kmaw) knowledge.

This method was chosen as a way to communicate, reflect on, and situate the concept of white-seeming privilege within the disciplinary context of curriculum studies while still maintaining the influence of Indigenous thought. There are two reasons for

Downey, A. (2020). A reflection on white-seeming privilege through the process of *currere*. *Currere Exchange Journal*, 3(2), 1-10.

this methodological choice. First, the field of curriculum studies has been criticized as being complacent with settler-colonialism through the replacement (and erasure) of Indigenous bodies, voices, identities, and thought within the field by those of settler “experts” (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013). There is, thus, a need to (re)assert Indigenous presence within the field, something to which I hope this paper implicitly contributes. Second, on a more personal note, though I have always framed my work as situated in curriculum studies, the theoretical connection has been tenuous at best (see Downey, 2017). This article is my attempt to make explicit the connection between white-seeming privilege and curriculum studies through Pinar’s autobiographical method, *currere*.

Toward methodological clarity, I have divided the remainder of this text into four sections corresponding to each of the four moments of *currere*. I will begin each section by describing the intent of the moment according to Pinar. Then, I will share the key insights that emerged as I engaged in free-writing for each of the four moments. Finally, I will conclude this paper by explicitly addressing white-seeming privilege in the context of curriculum studies, as well as summarizing and unifying the divergent threads of my reflection.

REGRESSIVE—WHERE DO YOU COME FROM?

In the regressive moment, one attempts to re-experience the past (Pinar, 2012). Through free association, one dwells within the experiences that were, ultimately enlarging them and understanding them anew. Through regression, we seek out not simply that which is conscious in our memories, but also that which is buried in the haze of our subconscious minds (Pinar, 2012). Here, I share two memories from the past two years, emergent from free-writing and selected for their relevance to my privilege and Indigeneity.

The most obvious memory that calls out to me to be shared is when my mother, my sister, and I received our letters informing us that our names would be removed from the Federal Indian Registry. There is a long history leading to this moment which I have described elsewhere (Downey, 2017, 2018a). Here, it is sufficient to say that the QMFN, of which my maternal family have been members since its formation, has undergone a membership review because of the high number of applicants to the band. This membership review resulted in, among other things, 10,512 Indians losing their status⁴ and band memberships for failure to meet the new criteria for membership. Debates, legal challenges, and community protests addressing these changes are still ongoing in Newfoundland and throughout Canada. Here, I am more interested in the human moments arising from the loss of Indian status in my own memory.

I have a standing phone call scheduled with my parents every Sunday night around 6:00 pm. Sometimes we talk throughout the week but, more often than not, whatever we have to say waits until Sunday night. One Sunday in May 2018, my mother mentioned that our letters from the band had come. We had been awaiting them for a long time. Although we had written appeal letters and provided as much documentation as possible, we had heard of other people in similar situations who had lost status, so we expected the worst. My mother told me that we had all been rejected, and though she had expected it, it did make her sad. My father, who is of settler descent, had much more to say about it—calling it a slap in the face (which it was), illegal (which it was), and stupid (which it was). Dad always had a way with words, but it was my mother’s simple statement of sadness that stayed with me. Throughout the life-long process of trying to prove our

Indigeneity, my mother had been the one who pushed us. To hear the sadness—*almost* defeat—in her voice was jarring.

Having shared experiences of my conflicted Indigenous identity, I would be remiss were I not to also share memories of my white privilege. There have been many. I could think about being named valedictorian when I graduated with my master's degree, receiving a doctoral fellowship to pursue my research, or more mundane instances of tacit acceptance at the grocery store, my apartment building, or the gym—often communicated with a smile or a nod of approval. Perhaps the clearest way I see my privilege, however, is when I am the only Indigenous person in a room where Indigenous people are being discussed. This happens frequently in classes, research presentations, and dissertation defenses, but regardless of the venue, there is a familiar feeling of discomfort that accompanies the conversation—a lingering unnamable feeling replete with uncommunicated expectations from others and from myself.

That unnamable feeling reared its head recently at a dissertation proposal, which I attended as an interested member of the public.⁵ It was a hot summer day, and as I walked into the room, I looked from face to face. I was surprised by the number of people, almost none of whom were familiar to me, and all of whom looked white. A few people nodded approvingly as I sat down, a few others smiled and chatted softly. Despite the calm in the room, a wave of anxiety washed over me. There was a striking absence here: no smudge, no Elder, no language keepers, no symbols of our culture—and perhaps most importantly, no familiar faces.

In my thesis defense—the culminating moment of a lifetime of internal work and a year's worth of reflective writing—I made it clear that as a white-seeming Mi'kmaq man, I needed to use my privilege to help my community. One way I have tried to do that is through challenging unethical research involving Indigenous people, particularly when I am the only Indigenous person present. A full discussion of ethical research involving Indigenous peoples is beyond the scope of this paper; however, it is worth noting that, historically, Indigenous people have been one of the most researched groups in the world, and much of that research has objectified, exoticized, and directly worked against the best interests of Indigenous people (Kovach, 2009; Tuck & McKenzie, 2015; Wilson, 2008). The current movement in research involving Indigenous people is toward research “with” or “by” rather than research “on” or “about” Indigenous people. The preposition test, as I call it, is a simple principle for assessing the involvement of Indigenous people in a particular project and works from the assumption that, if a researcher is researching Indigenous people, the Indigenous people need to be present at every point of the research process from inception to dissemination (see The First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2014).

When I walked into that room filled with faces like mine for the dissertation proposal, I carried all of that with me. I also carried the obligation to speak back to research that works “on” Indigenous people. On that day, however, I swallowed my doubts and opened my ears and heart to listen to the presenter. As they spoke, my anxiety quickly returned, and the more I heard, the more my anxiety shifted to anger. After the presentation was over, I knew I had to say something. I tried to be as open as possible and asked about the ethical implications of the presenter's work and whether they considered their work to be on, about, or with Indigenous peoples. I also made it clear that I thought they were working “on” Indigenous people and that I thought that was problematic. As the presenter responded to me, they did so in a tone I felt was rather reminiscent of some of the teachers I had in school—derogatory and paternalistic, as though “teacher knows

best.” It made me as uncomfortable then as it did when I was a student. I commented on the presenter’s tone, but this did nothing to change the situation. I waited for them to finish talking at me, and then I got up and left the room. Apparently, a few people from the 20 or so white faces also got up and left.

Afterward, I reflected on all the Indigenous children and adults who have been lectured, without possibility of escape, by a teacher who “knew best.” The fact that I could leave that situation at my choosing is an example of my white privilege. The fact that I was in that room in the first place is an example of my white privilege. The fact that I’ve been on the delivering end of similar “teacher knows best” lectures with First Nations students who didn’t look like me is also an example of my white privilege.

These experiences highlight the tensions involved in looking white and being Indigenous. They highlight the tensions of my contested, policed, and erased Indigenous identity and the privilege of being able to walk away. In my history, for every story of profound privilege, there is also a story of attempted erasure.

PROGRESSIVE—WHERE ARE YOU GOING?

In the progressive moment, we look toward the future. Pinar (2012) says, “contemplatively, the student of *currere* imagines possible futures, including fears as well as fulfillments” (p. 46). He goes on to discuss the importance of articulating one’s vision of the future in understanding oneself in the present. Here, I share some of my thinking about the future of my Indigenous identity and my privilege.

My future is not with *The Indian Act*.⁶ I have been given a letter that states that my name will be removed from the Federal Indian Registry. Even as I write these words there is some bitterness in my heart, but it is simply a reality I must accept. My parents and the Elders with whom I’ve spoken about this have been helpful. They remind me, “They can’t tell you who you are,” and they encourage me to keep paddling my canoe. For me, the future of my Indigenous identity is in ceremony, language, and relationships—not an arbitrary distinction made by The Canadian State. The future I wish for is one in which I can own that as my choice and not a decision that was forced upon me. In the future, I would rather look at my invalid status card⁷ with contempt than with remorse.

There are tensions within my vision of how I will use my privilege in the future. In the case of my colleague’s dissertation proposal, the critical scholar in me believes that I should be relentless in my critique of their work. I should write rejoinders when they publish, attend their conference presentations to ask difficult questions, and encourage my colleagues to do the same. Another part of me, however, knows that everyone has their path and that this researcher is, hopefully, working with the best of intentions. Asking difficult questions in the ways I have done invites negativity into my life through the form of damaged relationships and hurt pride; to this day, I carry some hurt with me from the moment I walked out of that presentation. Many of the Elders from whom I’ve had the great privilege of learning are careful with their criticisms, often opting to encourage someone rather than criticize. The negativity just isn’t worth it. In envisioning my future, I see conflict. I see moments of successfully challenging people to think through the implications of their work for Indigenous people through the tough questions that are sometimes required, but I also see asking those questions in more respectful and gentle tones than have marked my past. Ultimately, I have two hopes for the future. One is that there will be more Indigenous people attending these presentations with me, asking the questions I had written down as well as others I had not considered. The second is that Indigenous people—myself included—won’t always need to be the ones to ask hard questions or walk out of presentations, but rather that

settler-allies, supervision committees, and supervisors will be willing to do so on our behalf and in conjunction with us.⁸

Where the future is concerned, I mostly maintain what Jonathan Lear (2006) has called radical hope. This notion of radical hope is marked by the ability to creatively (re)imagine and reform one's life after everything that one knows has ceased to exist. North American Indigenous peoples have been existing in radical hope for at least the last 500 years. Almost every generation has had to creatively reimagine their life because the life they have known has been changed irreversibly. Here, I think of children being abducted and brought to residential schools and the 60s and millennial scoops (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). How do we go on when nothing is as we've known? We just do—as we have always done (Simpson, 2017). Generally, when I envision my future, it is marked by a simple acceptance of whatever might happen. This comes from attempts at a grounding in Mi'kmaw tradition: if I keep walking the good path, keep paddling my canoe, I will end up where I need to be. Being grounded in tradition is also a way of asserting presence and resisting erasure, and asserting Indigenous presence in the present serves as a way of displacing visions of the future that do not include Indigenous people (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013). For me, trying to be grounded in Mi'kmaw culture, language, and spirituality is what allows me to accept the chaos, conflict, and contentions of my identity.

ANALYTIC—WHY ARE YOU HERE?

As I understand it, the analytic moment is about analyzing the present in relation to the past and the future (Pinar, 1994, 2012). In the analytic moment, “we attempt to discern how the past inheres in the present and in our fantasies of the future (Pinar, 2012, p. 46). Pinar's directive for this moment is to “describe the biographical present, exclusive of the past and future, but inclusive of responses to them” (Pinar, 1994, p. 25). In this analytic stage, I share insights into why I am here through where I come from and where I am going.

I am Mi'kmaw. I learn the language of my ancestors so that it can become the language through which I express my heart-thoughts.⁹ This process of learning is, for me, a way of speaking back to the past, especially the people who told my mother, my sister, and myself that we were not “Indians.” This kind of learning is always a future-oriented, hopeful process, but it also lives in the present—it is one of the things I do that connects me to who I am.

Though initially the idea of being removed from the Federal Registry was an insulting, painful, and frightening prospect that caused me to question the core of my being, it no longer fills me with the same sense of dread and existential angst. I know who I am. *The Indian Act* is a relic of the assimilatory mandate of the foreign occupying state known as Canada (Palmater, 2011). It was designed with the expressed intent of absorbing the Indigenous population into the body politic and has historically proven the most detrimental to women (Palmater, 2011). It is a perfect distillation of the heteronormative, capitalistic, assimilative, settler-colonial thinking of The Canadian State (Simpson, 2017) and something I want nothing to do with. In fact, many Indigenous people in Canada are now trying to get out of the Indian Act (Palmater, 2015). The case of the Qalipu is somewhat different. Because we never had federal recognition, it became a priority. As I've learned from my Indigenous brothers and sisters outside of Newfoundland, the real issue is not recognition, but sovereignty (Palmater, 2015). The Mi'kmaw nation as a whole has a strong case for sovereignty, and the case in Newfoundland is no weaker (see Wetzel, 1995). We never ceded, surrendered, or sold

our territory; we never gave up our Land. We have been occupied for the last 500 years, but we are still sovereign, and sovereign nations do not negotiate citizenship with foreign, occupying forces. Now, in the present, I can say I am Mi'kmaw because I know the history of my people, as well as my own personal history. I also know that, in the future, this dimension of my identity will be unchanged.

Pinar (1994) suggests that, “for many, the present is woven into the fabric of institutional life” (p. 25). This is both a source and manifestation of my privilege. My present reality is that I am writing an article on a computer loaned to me by my university, free of charge. I do not have to work in order to pay for my tuition because I have been sufficiently *schooled* in grant and publication writing and western ways of knowing, resulting in funding for my doctoral research. I have an office in which I can keep my books and in which I can feel secure. Needless to say, my present reality is possible in large part because of who I am and where I come from—specifically the educational advantages I received as someone perceived as white and male. These facts of my history and the tensions within my vision of the future are what led me, and lead me in this moment, to challenge my peers’ research. The research being done and the conversations being had in universities across Canada and in other countries affect the lives of Indigenous peoples, and the people who are affected by that research are rarely present at proposal presentations, conferences, or meetings.¹⁰ The present reality for me, and one reason why I am here, is that I am one who asks hard questions of my peers. This is because of my history of privilege—I am one who has the privilege of being there to hear when our people are being talked *about*. Thus, for the time being, disruption is an ethical imperative informed by my past and manifest in my future—though I personally and spiritually maintain hope that someday that may not be the case.

SYNTHETIC—WHO ARE YOU?

The synthetic moment is about piecing or placing together. It is a moment in which “listening carefully to one’s own inner voice in the historical and natural world, one asks, ‘what is the meaning of the present?’” (Pinar, 2012, pp. 46-47). It is, by my reading, a more holistic iteration of the present moment in all its complexity. This is the reality and wholeness of “who you are.” Below, I attempt to share my synthetic insights on Indigenous identity and privilege.

My privilege and my Indigenous identity are intimately intertwined. I am Mi'kmaw, and I am white. This means I walk in two worlds (Loverm & Locust, 2013) and see with two eyes (Bartlett, Marshall, & Marshall, 2012): one Western, filled with empirical, rational, and critical ways of knowing, the other Mi'kmaw marked by an intuitive knowledge of and appreciation for the interconnectedness of all things (Henderson, 2016; see also Cajete, 2000; Graveline, 1998; Wilson, 2008). Sometimes this is of great benefit, like in writing a reflective article such as this or in helping settler students make sense of their privilege and guiding them along the path to allyship. Other times, it can be jarring and difficult, such as when I’m trying to explain my research to my aunts, uncles, and parents or being challenged by an Indigenous person who doesn’t see/recognize me as Indigenous. Sometimes these two worldviews conflict and clash, as in my discussion of how to ask critical questions or even in thinking about whether to write this article, where questions always linger (What does it mean for me to write from an Indigenous perspective? How “authentic” is my voice? Does it matter? Is this article in the best interests of Indigenous people?). Walking in two worlds and seeing with two eyes helps me to see the ways in which Canada polices my identity; it also shows me

the path toward resistance. Walking this way lets me understand my privilege and my identity in the context of my lived reality, and that gives me the power to speak when I need to and the humility to listen the rest of the time.

I've come to think of my privilege and my identity as a talking circle (Downey, 2018b). For me, my Indigenous identity and my privilege are ongoing negotiations between myself, my family, my community, my nation, the natural world, and the cosmos (see Graveline, 1998; Stonechild, 2016). We are all speaking and listening to one another; slowly, things are changing, growing, and shifting; categories are not so static as they once were because we can see the conversations that inform them. In short, by seeing myself through the lens of a talking circle and ongoing negotiation, I notice the absence of black and white and begin to appreciate the myriad shades and colours between. Privilege is no longer an "either/or," but rather a "yes/and."

CONCLUSION

Here, I have attempted to reflect on some recent experiences that have furthered my thinking about white-seeming privilege, a concept discussed thoroughly in my previous writing (Downey, 2017, 2018a). I have attempted to frame this reflective thinking through Pinar's framework of *currere* both to assert Indigenous presence within the field of curriculum studies (see Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013) and in an effort to make more explicit the theoretical connection I see between curriculum studies and white-seeming privilege. Below, I comment more directly on the latter connection.

Kumar (2013) identifies four meanings of the word awareness in curriculum studies: the scientific, the critical, the autobiographical, and the meditative. For me, these distinctions serve as a useful way of thinking about the diversity of perspectives that exist within curriculum studies. Awareness from the scientific perspective might refer to awareness of objectives and would be rooted in the work of Tyler and Bobbit. A critical understanding of awareness might refer to conscientization, Freire's (1996) name for the process of gaining a critical understanding of the world with particular reference to the ideologies at work within it. The meditative understanding of awareness is Kumar's own contribution to the literature and is, according to Kumar, a more holistic and spiritual engagement with one's inner conflicts than that presented in the autobiographical meaning of awareness.

Autobiographical awareness is an awareness of one's lived experience and the way one's life can be historically, culturally, politically, and socially situated and is informed by the work of Pinar (1994, 2012; Pinar & Grumet, 1976). This autobiographical way of thinking is where I see my work fitting within the broader study of curriculum. The basic axiom from which all my work as an academic, teacher, artist, and activist stems is that *personal narrative disrupts dominant narrative*. My thesis, which was framed as personal storytelling or arts-informed autobiography, was my attempt at presenting my own story in hopes of disrupting and complicating the dominant narrative around privilege as dichotomous and/or binary. I wanted to give voice to the "racial shadow zones that are created for us and that we create for ourselves" (King, 2003, p. 92). Writing my thesis allowed me to create a space—perhaps a third space (Wang, 2004)—where I didn't see one before; it gave me the platform from which to acknowledge my privilege and my familial history of Indigenous erasure in the same breath. In the moment of my writing, that was the knowledge of most worth. I think that in every moment we all ought to be able to answer the question of what knowledge is of most worth for ourselves. I claimed my right to do that through my thesis, and I see Pinar

and those who take up autobiographical curriculum theory as doing the same. It is, thus, through the autobiographical that I see my work around white-seeming privilege as curriculum theory.

Revisiting the conceptual space of my thesis in this article has provided new insight into my own lived reality and study of curriculum. Through this re-visitation, the connection between my work and curriculum studies—which was something that was always intended, but never came to fruition in the actual thesis writing process—has been more fully theorized. My hope is, however, that my work here has also provided others some insight into the complexity of lived Indigenous experience. Specifically, I hope that settlers doing work on or about Indigenous people know that the reason they haven't been challenged by Indigenous people is because we aren't always present or emotionally capable of doing that work. Second, I hope that those not previously aware of the ways in which the foreign occupying state known as Canada continues to police Indigenous identity have seen one example of the phenomenon. Third, I hope that I have highlighted the complexities of privilege. Finally, I hope that readers of this work will remember that the white privilege to which we of translucent identity have access comes as the result of generations of forced assimilation, denied recognition, and erasure (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015). As my colleague asked, "What kind of privilege is that?"

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Endnotes

¹Adrian M. Downey is Mi'kmaw PhD candidate at the university of New Brunswick in the faculty of education. He can be reached at adowney3@unb.ca

²In Canada, indigenous people are given federal recognition through the status system. The legislation that created this system is called the Indian Act (see footnote 5). The Indian Act was not enacted in Newfoundland when the province joined Canada in

1949, which left the indigenous people there without federal recognition. Indigenous people have been fighting ever since to correct this. In 2008, my mother, my sister, and I were all accepted as members of the Qalipu Mi'kmaw First Nation—a band set up to encompass all previously unrecognized indigenous people of Newfoundland. We gained federal recognition, or “status” as Indians, in 2012. In 2013, because of a huge influx of applications, the federal government and Mi'kmaw leadership in Newfoundland established a membership review that reassessed all of the original members (n= ~22,000) and all of the remaining applicants (n= ~70,000) by a new set of criteria, which strongly emphasized one's presence in Newfoundland. The results of the membership review were made public last January, where 10,512 Indians lost their status. Despite successful court actions against the appeal process, those 10,512 people lost their status as of August 31, 2018. My mother, my sister, and I were among the 10,512, while my mother's brothers and sisters and their children have mostly retained their status because of their continued presence in Newfoundland.

³Some people may be more familiar with the term white-passing privilege (Ellignberg, 2015). I use white-seeming for two reasons. First, the term “passing” is used in some Mi'kmaw communities to refer to one's journey to the spirit world; using “seeming” is one small way of honouring my tribal epistemology or traditional knowledge system (Kovach, 2009). The second reason is that passing semantically implies an intentionality of deception, which is inconsistent with the way I experience the phenomenon (see Kreoger, 2003 for a definition of passing). I make no attempt to present myself as other than I understand myself to be, yet sometimes I am perceived that way. I do not pass; I seem.

⁴Status is the legal designation for someone who is of Indigenous ancestry within Canada. See footnote 2 for more details.

⁵My description of this event has been left purposefully vague in certain areas in order to preserve the anonymity of presenter. Unfortunately, my discussion here could apply to any number of proposal presentations I have attended.

⁶The Indian Act is the piece of Canadian legislation that lays out the laws regarding the federal governments' relationship with Indigenous peoples. It determines who is and who is not an Indian through the status system and has historically been aimed at assimilation (Palmater, 2011). It can be viewed online at <http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/i-5/>

⁷A status card is a government issued id for status holding Indians.

⁸This shouldn't take anything away from those elders, knowledge keepers, and scholars who do challenge unethical work. The point here is that it shouldn't always have to be our responsibility, not that we shouldn't do it.

⁹There is no word in English that really captures those things that you know in your heart but not in your mind. I call them heart-thoughts.

¹⁰It is becoming more common within particular paradigms of thinking but is still far from the norm.