Posthuman Embodiments and Overuse Injuries Amid COVID-19

By Adrian M. Downey
Mount Saint Vincent University

Seeking a Curriculum of Injury

Capitalist accelerationism names the relentless quickening of the Western societal pulse—the heartbeat driving our economy, social institutions, and jobs. It is not difficult to observe. Two-day shipping and self-checkouts, for example, speak to the relentless speed and efficiency demanded in capitalism's current form, and we who teach are not exempt from this economically-driven race to nowhere. Have you felt it—students, parents, and administrators asking for, sometimes demanding, more of your attention with a frighteningly immediate timeframe in their request? I have, more readily each year. It can be exhausting.

Sudden absence often leaves behind a specter that renders the recently departed knowable in a new light. When the COVID-19 pandemic began in early March of 2020, I was struck by accelerationism's presence in my own life through its absence all around me. Do you remember the empty streets, blocks of closed shop fronts, and the campus ghost town left in the wake of a total societal shutdown? I remember it. It was not just a slower tempo, but a full stop; a collective pause between run-on sentences. But for me, and I suspect for many others in postsecondary education, the pause never came. I observed this stillness from the window of my home office, where I worked eight or more hours every day trying to finish my dissertation, attending meetings, and teaching my spring courses online and earlier than expected.

It was in this disjointed temporal climate, where the outside world slowed to a stop and my own life became busier than it ever had been, that I began to think about my body. My reconsideration was forced, brought about by overuse injuries in both of my arms and one of my legs. These injuries slowed, but did not stop, my progress, and while they were not a direct result of COVID-19, the change from working in my well-equipped office at the university to the small two-bedroom apartment I share with my partner certainly did not make things easy. I wondered if others felt the same way or experienced similar problems, but it seemed that many people enjoyed working from home. If their relationships with their bodies changed, it was for the better, as there was more time to enjoy home-cooked meals and to exercise.

I am still living with these injuries, and in addition to my efforts at rehabilitation through the guidance of a physiotherapist, I am actively trying to find meaning in them and learn more about how they have changed the relationships between my body, my self, my mind, and my work. I am actively seeking a curriculum of injury. Celeste Snowber's 2016 book, *Embodied Inquiry*, asks us to dwell within our bodies and (re) consider our relationships with our physical selves—injuries and all. I am trying to do that now. I am trying to (re)think and (re)build the computer-body assemblage, trying to adapt to the body-cane assemblage, trying to honour the agency of my adductor muscles and listen carefully to their muffled voices. I am trying to understand my body and its otherwises from the inside, but I cannot ignore the external factors either. We are still in the middle of a pandemic, and academia is not *back to normal*—whatever that means. This, and many other things, form my curriculum of injury. It is a curriculum that is always particular to the individual, but a course many have run (e.g., Morris,

Downey, A. M. (2021). Posthuman embodiments and overuse injuries amid COVID-19. *Currere Exchange Journal*, *5*(1), 13–21.

1999). Thus, just as Snowber's *Embodied Inquiry* is an invitation to (re)consider our bodies, the curriculum of injury is also an invitation to (re)consider our bodies and their relationships to the social and more-than-human worlds.

The purpose of this essay is to engage in the process of *currere* (Pinar, 1994, 2012; Pinar & Grumet, 2015) around these injuries and my own sense of my body toward elucidating, uncovering, or perhaps storying my own curriculum of injury. *Currere* has its intellectual roots in feminist, phenomenological, and psychoanalytic theories (Pinar & Grumet, 2015), and in that it deals largely with the internal dimension of curriculum as a verb—the subject's movement between moments of becoming. *Currere* has been critiqued as an apolitical sort of curricular engagement, but Pinar has written back to that critique (Pinar & Grumet, 2015), and many in curriculum theory today follow his lead in believing that social change begins with internal change (e.g., Kumar, 2013). Where the social is concerned, my own curriculum of injury is embedded in a critique of work (Frayne, 2015; Weeks, 2011), postindustrial capitalism (Bauman, 2007; Sennett, 1998), and the way neoliberalism infiltrates education (Kumar, 2019; Ross & Gibson, 2007). I know all too well the way Western capitalism and its obsession with work has written itself into my body. I work too much—that much is implicit in the label of "overuse injuries." I have overused my body, and I suspect I am not alone in this. Thus, part of my *currere* here is engaged with how neoliberal capitalism has seeped into my own sense of self-worth in hopes of speaking back to the larger societal phenomenon of capitalist accelerationism.

While the inward direction of *currere* has been tempered in terms of its implications for the social dimensions of reality (Pinar & Grumet, 2015), less has been written about how *currere* might address the more-than-human and non-human. There is tension here in that some posthumanists and/or "new" materialists downplay the significance of the subject (e.g., Latour, 2005), favoring an object-oriented ontology—a sort of "new" empiricism (St. Pierre et al., 2016). Braidotti (2019), however, has critiqued these object-centered visions of posthumanism, pointing out how they can erase social differences that still have tangible effects on people's lives. Braidotti's (2019) own vision of the posthuman subject as an assemblage of geo/techno/bio/logical entities with social forces acting upon it from "above" and psychological forces acting on it from "below" offers a space for an internal inquiry, such as *currere*, to produce affective and material ripples for both the subject-assemblage and the social dimensions of reality.

In other words, Braidotti's vision of a critical posthumanism opens the door for *currere* to engage not just with the self as unitary (but fragmented) consciousness, but also with the self as agentive/vital material assemblage and the self as social agent. This particular frame of reference, then, affords both a consideration of personal thoughts and feelings about my injuries and an engagement with the assemblages that now help form my self: the cane-hand-leg assemblage and the keyboard-finger assemblage, for example. This critical posthumanist frame acknowledges the interconnectedness of the internal world and physical reality, but it also enables an engagement with the social world. In this essay, then, I enter into the process of *currere* with critical posthumanism and critique of neoliberal capitalism filtering freely into my thoughts.

Toward methodological clarity, I have divided the remainder of this essay into four main sections, each corresponding to a moment in Pinar's (1994) method of *currere*: the regressive, the progressive, the analytic, and the synthetic. Although some sections below are more narrative than others, within the paper as a whole, I attempt to weave story and theory together toward deepening understandings of my own embodied relationship

to my overuse injuries and toward elucidating a curriculum of injury in relationship with the wider conversation of (curriculum) theory. I conclude this essay by briefly pulling the threads of my discussion into the current socio-enviro-political context of the COVID-19 pandemic. In closing, I suggest *currere*—indeed, any curriculum—cannot remain static amid, nor be examined apart from, a changing world. The social and the psychological work together on our material realities and help form our subjects—we are products of a diffused agency, and that gives *currere* a renewed potential for social and curricular change.

Storying Embodiment and Injury

My first sense of embodiment came through rhythm. In high school, I was fortunate enough to learn percussion from an inspiring teacher. As I began to practice snare drum rudiments, I started to develop an undulating sense of rhythm—a left and right side of the beat based on which hand was hitting the drum at what portion of the pulse. Later on, in university and while teaching, these rudiments became a source of relaxation, easing my body into a calmer state. The rhythm was so deeply engrained in my body that when I listened to music, my body would often move of its own accord—not as steady or as relaxed as when I was playing, rather through a series of twitches.

The first and most vivid memory of these twitches came when listening to the record, *Jane Doe*, by the American hardcore band Converge. I was at a friend's apartment in the first year of my undergraduate degree. There were five of us there, all of whom were music majors. Like most nights, we took turns passing around the auxiliary cable to share music from our Mp3 players. *Jane Doe* is a relentless, heavy, driving, and unapologetically rhythmic record. I closed my eyes, and after a few songs, my body started to twitch. It was compelling music, gripping music, and I wanted to share in the experience of creating it—my body was reaching out for it, trying to respond to the rhythms being played over the stereo. Today, I might say that the sound waves and my body were intra-active (Barad, 2007).

A few years later, my sense of embodiment changed with my first overuse injury. It happened during the 2011 winter reading break in the drum room at my university. While practicing, I felt something pop in my wrist but did not think much of it. I had exams and concerts coming up, and I needed to practice. As I continued to practice, the popping happened a few more times, and my wrist started to hurt, a lot. I stopped for the day and went home, dejected. It got much worse over the next few days (likely because I refused to rest it properly), and by the end of the week, I couldn't play at all. Concerts were canceled, exams were rearranged, and my sense of self started to crumble. Music was everything to me at that time in my life, and not being able to participate in it left me feeling lost.

By the next fall, I had recovered enough to play a bit, and it gradually got better after that until the winter of 2014. I was teaching then, and as I sat down at the drumkit to have a bit of fun before the start of my weekend, I felt a familiar pop. I stopped immediately that time, but it was still a six-month recovery before I could play again. In the meantime, I focused on my teaching. Things were good with my wrists until August of 2019 when it flared up again, likely because I had been typing too much. This time, the issues were in both my wrists. Physiotherapy and physicians have done all kinds of tests and assessments over the years, and they often label it an overuse injury. There is not any permanent nerve damage, they say, just muscular discomfort and weakness. None of our searches for underlying causes beyond my own behaviors have yielded any

results. This time it has been a bit longer than six months with my wrists—a year and a half at the time of writing. Things have gotten better, of course, but never as good as they were. The amount I can type in a given day is dependent how my wrists feel, and that really limits how much work I can do. Perhaps most disheartening is the fact that I have not played music since August 2019, and I am not sure I ever will again.

This is not the end of my overuse injury story. There is one more chapter. The most recent and most raw of my injuries, a strain on/in my left adductor, is the driving force behind this inquiry. Stretching after a weekend run in April, 2020, I heard a loud pop in my knee followed by agonizing pain. I teleconferenced with a doctor a few days later. Six to eight weeks, he said and sent me to a physiotherapist who provided exercises that I performed daily. Eight weeks later, things felt better, but not good, and a pattern started to develop. Things get better but never as good as they were, and then they get worse. As I write this, I am in week 34 of my injury, just beyond the six-month anniversary. In that time, I've started a new job, finished my doctoral program, published papers, taught courses, and attended more meetings than I can count. And I am starting to wonder if that is the problem.

The Futurity of Acceptance

I dream of recovery, but the reality of the situation is that my future more likely lies with acceptance. In that, there is perhaps something of an allegory for western society more broadly. Both social and personal futures of recovery deal in the utopic—the perfect nowhere of imagination (Zamalin, 2019), impossible yet powerful in its role as futurity or making a vision of the future tangible in the present (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013). Recovery implies a return to a state of wholeness or to an original capacity, but recovery is never quite possible. Always the recursive return to health is marked by the journey—we cannot help but be changed by the process. In this way, recovery is a utopia; it is a dream of what could be, but one that is always ultimately "not yet."

I do not mean to sound defeatist in this, only to acknowledge that any return is always changed by the having been. I may someday be able to work all day—or to play music again—without constantly thinking about whether or not my wrist can handle it, but the process of living with these injuries has fundamentally changed my sense of embodiment. My experience of these injuries has changed the way I feel my wrists and my legs and altered the way I live with/in my body as a whole. Even if I recover in a medical sense, I will never again live without knowing the tightness of a wrist flexor, weakness in an adductor, or the impingement of an ulnar nerve—not in an abstract sense, but in a lived, embodied sense. The possibility of a future marked by recovery (complete return), then, is impossible.

So too must any vision of a societal future be informed by an awareness of what is now. This is one of the key points of Braidotti's (2019) discussion of affirmative ethics. Like many writing today—at posthuman convergence, or the intersection of the Sixth Extinction Event and the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Braidotti, 2019, 2020); in the socio-economic and environmental precarity of postindustrial capitalism (Bauman, 2007); amid the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic (Downey, 2020)—Braidotti (2019, 2020) is concerned with finding ways of creating more just and equitable societal structures in the future. Unlike those who seek utopic technological solutions to the problems of today and those critics who see dystopia as an imminent reality, Braidotti finds ways forward in the affirmative: "We need to resist with equal lucidity the pull of apocalyptic thinking as well as the abyss of self-pity: this is a time to organize, not to

agonize" (Braidotti, 2020, p. 467). The affirmative is not blindly optimistic; it stays with the difficult critiques that can be levied at our present social context and allows them to inform what will be. The affirmative takes postindustrial capitalism, socio-technological acceleration, and the resulting affective exhaustion as simple facts—this is how the world is, now—and, rather than lament their existence, demands that we engage with them toward change. That systemic change must reflect our understandings of how social forces act in our biopolitical and necropolitical realities, but also on our techno/geo/bio/logical assemblages—our posthuman subjects—and on those vital/material assemblages of which we are not a part.

In this, affirmative ethics is one step removed from a futurity. It does not render possible futures as knowable in the present, rather it offers terms of engagement that will yield a different future. Affirmative ethics, however, requires us as a society to accept the reality of what is. By accepting the facts of the world in its present state, we are free to start remaking the world through creative responses to critiques of what is. In my reading, affirmative ethics looks at capitalist acceleration and says "Okay, now what? Can we do better?"

A future made knowable through acceptance—through the affirmative—resonates at the micro level of my bodily assemblage as well. Before that future can become knowable, however, the affirmative demands an intimate knowledge and sustained critique of what is. The affirmative is not optimistic as much as it is realistic, secular, and materialist. Here, although *currere* is essentially a non-linear process and "should be understood as a set of interconnected, rhizomatic (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) moments that 'frame' the complex process of conscious self-actualization" (McNulty, 2019, p. 75), the method does provide a helpful structure in the encouragement to separate out the present from the future and the past before allowing them to inform one another in the synthetic moment (Pinar, 1994). In the following analytic section, I entertain the actuality of my present daily embodiment—both physical and affective—before returning to the question of societal futures in the subsequent synthetic section.

What is: Body and Affect

The acceptance of what is comes with limitations. In my initial experiences with overuse injuries, the loss of the ability to play music was a limitation not only on my societal productivity, but also on my sense of self. Though perhaps less traumatic, the limitations of my current situation are no less a loss.

So far today, November 19, 2020, I have typed about 500 words, and my wrists are calling out for a break. I have obliged them several times already this morning, and I will continue to do so throughout the day. This frustrates me. I have had this essay sketched in my mind for months, but teaching online, other writing projects, and corresponding with students has taken up the majority of my typing capacity since September. It is now my second day in this section, November 20, 2020; I have only written about 100 words so far, and I am hoping to be able to finish this section before I need a break. My leg is uncomfortable today. There is a tightness in the adductor itself and a tingle in the inside of my calf radiating down to my big toe. My physiotherapist says the tingling is because there is a nerve compressed somewhere near the adductor. It is not really a pain as much as it is a constant annoyance—almost like a mild burn on my skin. I have changed my sitting position a number of times in this writing session, and I just did so again after that clause. In my final round of edits before submission beginning on December 28, 2020, the tingle has moved around my foot and now resides in my heel. My right bicep tendon is particularly agitated as well.

As alluded to above, a number of new bodily assemblages have formed. The cane-hand-leg assemblage is new and tricky to navigate. Originally, the cane-hand-leg assemblage was intended to help me navigate the stairs in my apartment building, which are difficult with my adductor problems. Indeed, two days ago I heard someone cough at the bottom of the stairwell, and I abandoned the cane in favor of speed, COVID-19 paranoia having gotten the better of me. I am living with the consequences today in the form of a renewed intensity to the discomfort in my leg. The cane-hand-leg assemblage is constantly intra-acting with the wrist, the wrist flexor, and the ulnar nerve. When there is too much pressure, the wrist flexor cries out. Then the next day, when the computer-body assemblage reforms, the wrist flexors are less keen to engage. On days like that, the computer sits eagerly waiting, and the fingers sulk about, unwilling to participate without the support of their kin.

Here, I am perhaps projecting my own affect—that which precedes emotion (Braidotti, 2019) but really could be considered emotion (Ahmed, 2014)—onto my bodily others. In that way, my internal psychology is acting on the subject assemblage. This internal dimension of the now makes clear the difficulty of acceptance.

My legs have prevented me from exercising for the past seven months, and my body has changed as a result. Here there is a socially constructed ideal—the fit/ideal body—to which I cannot measure. Ideals, in general, are always abstract, unattainable, and utopic. Curriculum theorist Ashwani Kumar (2013) has written about the way that ideals create an internal, psychological process of continual striving. We are never satisfied with what we are because we are constantly measuring ourselves against what we *should* or *must* be. My bodily limitations interfere with my pursuit of these ideals. My physical appearance is not what I would like it to be—I am failing to actualize my ideal, which has been forced on me through socialization—so I should exercise. I cannot exercise because of my overuse injuries. I am left with an uncomfortable, anxious emotion I can never name in the moment, a desire to do something and a feeling of helplessness.

These feelings are the everyday reality of my present. No matter how I name them or how thoroughly I can prove them logically false, their presence lingers at the periphery of every interaction. Kumar (2013) names the acceptance of what is as a starting point of what he calls meditative inquiry. Kumar says that accepting ourselves as we are, rather than trying to strive toward a societally constructed ideal, can break us out of the cycle of comparative and hierarchical thinking endemic to Western society (see also Krishnamurti, 1968). If we see ourselves as the flawed and imperfect human beings we truly are and accept that reality in our hearts, we will no longer desire to be other than that. If I can only accept that I am valuable apart from my work—apart from my productivity, apart from my physical appearance, apart from my strength and masculinity—I will be free from the negative affect that traps me in a cycle of *should* and *must*. Acceptance, then, is a space that joins the present to the future, but as I suggest in the next section, I am not sure acceptance is as easy as writing the word over and over would make it seem.

Toward an Ongoing Acceptance

Perhaps there is a hope for the future in the acceptance of what is. Acceptance, however, is not a simple *now*, but rather an ever-ongoing series of them; it is less a state of being and more a constant becoming. Acceptance is a mindful engagement with the critique and affect of the present (and its past) that will inform the future. Acceptance is the affirmative, and the affirmative demands acceptance. If we are to accept the present, we must understand it—not through particular, separated lenses, but in its actuality,

particularly its effects on and in material reality. Here, I draw on the micro instance of work as an allegorical stand-in for Western society more broadly.

I am frustrated. My frustration is with an ideal of myself as a productive researcher—a good employee, a good worker. This frustration must be understood within the societal context of the postindustrial economy and specifically the way neoliberal ideology infiltrates the perception of self. Under the neoliberalism and flexible capitalism of the current era, ever-increasing demands for productivity are held in place through shifting risk to individual actors (i.e., workers, entrepreneurs) rather than corporate or government entities. Individual actors can be simultaneously alienated from and fiercely devoted to their work (Snyder, 2016; see also Frayne, 2015). Work obsession provides an example of the wider phenomenon. In the corporate and academic worlds, work obsession is not only normative, but expected (Frayne, 2015; Weeks, 2011), and the measure of work is largely external. Hourly wages surveil the body's presence; per-piece and per-project wages reward completion over process; and even those given to writing and thinking in an academic sense are judged primarily on the external/extrinsic value of the task: books, articles, lectures, service, and teaching. The constant measurement of our output begins to seep into our own self-image, and suddenly our self-worth is measured in productivity (Frayne, 2015)—I am only valuable to the degree to which I am productive at my given task. In this way, the external structures of capitalism seep into our own self-image, limiting the shape of our interiorities by way of ideological saturation facilitated by the ubiquity of a supposedly benign societal obsession with work.

In the present moment, I am frustrated by my perceived failure to be as productive as I would like. Following Kumar (2013) and the above, however, I am more accurately frustrated by my perceived failure to be as productive as my affective, embodied sense of neoliberal capitalist ideology would like. Frustration arises from an arbitrary, constructed ideal toward which I strive but ultimately fail to meet. The affirmative, however, acknowledges the *real* demand for a certain level of productivity to the economy, to our sense of self, and to helping our institutions function. This is where the affirmative demands a progressive and ongoing acceptance. It is not enough to cognitively know that these ideals—whether of body or of work—are socially constructed; rather, we must keep that knowledge close to us, embody it, and let it affect our assembled self as we vision the future and actively enact our constant becoming(s).

At the micro instance of my body, acceptance comes in waves: a crest of calm after two hours of uninterrupted cooperation between the computer-body-chair assemblage, but a trough of anxiety and frustration after a restless night of leg-bed disagreement. There is perhaps a similar quality to Western society as well: at moments it seems like we can all pull together to remake our world into something equitable and just, but at others that which divides us seems insurmountable. Braidotti (2019) says "we are all in this together, but we are not one and the same" (p. 52). Acceptance in the affirmative means we need to engage in ongoing and mindful attentiveness to the facts of our difference—there are real social oppressions in our world that must be actively considered as we move forward. These issues will never be "solved"—that would be utopic. We must, thus, ready ourselves for the hard work of sustaining engagement. That is the affirmative futurity of acceptance. That is what I am learning now through the curriculum of injury.

Acceptance and Futurity Amid COVID-19

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, we have become eminently aware of our viral others and the ways they interact with our social and economic worlds. Here, I recall those closed shop fronts, the phantom cough at the bottom of the stairwell, and the now

almost 10 months of working from home, all of which were caused in some part by a virus acting on what we perceive as our human world. These microbial others are not new. They are always co-present with us as we walk, run, sleep, work, and create. In the last year, however, we have become attuned to their presence in new ways, and perhaps that attunement is a lesson worth learning.

Currere has an incredible educational and theoretical potential evidenced by the many quality works found in the *Currere Exchange Journal*. To this day, whenever I teach *currere* in curriculum courses, students are amazed that their experiences count as theory and can indeed be seen as valuable in the complicated conversation of curriculum (Pinar, 2012). *Currere* also has a political power, both in the transformation of the self and in the place of prominence given to personal experience—sometimes akin to the counter-hegemonic function of storytelling in Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The transformative potential of self-inquiry, however, not only acts in/on the human social world, but also on/in/with the more-than-human. While in critical posthumanism the psychological and social forces above and below the subject work on/in/with material realities, the more immediate implication of self-inquiry for the more-than-human is that internal change through *currere* can bring an attunement to the more-than-human. By going inward and "staying with the trouble" (Haraway, 2016, n.p.) of our self, we can see the trouble of others—human and more-than-human alike—in more complex, nuanced, and empathetic ways. In this, *currere* offers a way forward at this "unprecedented" moment of socio-environmental and economic precarity, curricular uncertainty, and constant change.

Currere offers the gift of attunement to the curriculum of injury, the curriculum of loss, and the curriculum of the more-than-human, and it can do so through the affirmative. It can enact a futurity of ongoing acceptance of our microbial others and their trouble through a continuous internal engagement with the critique and the affect of what is—in this moment, relentless speed and total exhaustion (Braidotti, 2019, 2020). *Currere*, however, cannot do these things without itself being open to change. Here, I have brought critical posthumanism and critique of neoliberalism into conversation with *currere*, and in that, it has changed. Such change is necessary at this moment—not just for *currere*, but all curriculum. We cannot stay static amid a chaotic and unpredictable world. Just as *currere* must change, it can also offer the path to change—an inward path toward understanding what is. *Currere* can be the path to accepting and moving forward with/in the curriculum of planetary injury.

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