Sadness and Education: Emotion, *Currere*, and La Dispute's *Wildlife*

By Adrian M. Downey
Mount Saint Vincent University

Questions of Sadness

Is it ever appropriate to show sadness as a teacher? Not disappointment, not empathy for another's loss or grief, but our own personal sadness. This question has haunted my teaching since my earliest professional experiences.

In the fall of 2009, I was a second-year undergraduate student beginning my first practicum at an elementary school in Québec, Canada. I was 19 years old; I had a shaken and erratic life and a tenuous hold on reality—all of which was physically manifest. I wore my hair in a long, chaotic, unkempt ponytail. I had a pencil thin moustache and a soul patch. I wore a long fur coat that was many times too big and black jeans and t-shirts.

I certainly didn't look like any teacher I had ever had. But perhaps the most striking thing about my physical appearance in those days was my sullen visage and my sad eyes. The previous year of university life had left me lost and broken. The unwelcomed end of a high school relationship, the death of a once-close friend, a general feeling of outsiderness that I still carry with me, and the physical distance between my family and me all contributed to my sadness. At my lowest point, I was e-mailing back and forth daily with an online depression support hotline—it was the only way I knew how to ask for help. I kept most things inside, and no one at the university noticed. I still went to classes, and at the end of September, I had to step into my first teaching experience.

When sadness is our everyday reality, we don't always think it strange or problematic. Sometimes, we need others to hold up a mirror to us before we see ourselves as we are. My supervising teacher waited until the last day of my practicum to hold up that mirror. About halfway through our conversation, I realized she was giving me a failing grade on my evaluation. She had several professional reasons—my inability to talk to her about what I was feeling regarding the class, my lack of long-term planning, and my bizarre attire—but her main justification for giving me a failing grade, it seemed, was the fact that I didn't smile at my colleagues in the hallways. She said that I didn't look *happy* to be there.

This experience, more than a decade ago now, has stayed with me, and so has my sadness. Now a scholar of curriculum studies, however, I find myself preoccupied with a larger question: What does sadness teach? This question, I think, is best answered through the process of *currere* (Pinar, 1994). An autobiographical approach to curriculum theorizing, *currere* works in four moments: the regressive, the progressive, the analytic, and the synthetic. These moments work at the intersection of psychoanalytic, feminist, and phenomenological theorizing (Pinar & Grumet, 2015), and they tend to bleed into one another rhizomatically (McNulty, 2019).

Though primarily focused on lived experiences, Pinar (Pinar & Grumet, 2015; see also Pinar, 1994) also highlighted the role literature can play in understanding one's curricular experiences in *currere*. Indeed, Pinar has often discussed the way literature informed the initial concept of *currere* (Pinar, 2020). Rather than literature, however, music has taught me the most about sadness. Specifically, this paper draws on the album *Wildlife* by the American post-hardcore band La Dispute[1] as a source of my theorizing.

Modeled after the poem, *Pale Fire*, by Vladimir Nabokov (1962), *Wildlife* is a portrait of sadness, and it is often noted for its emotionally evocative lyrics (Andrews, 2011), which vividly address loss, coping, death, and hope. Through its lyrics, *Wildlife* provides a mirror for my own everyday sadness and a site to examine the meaning of that sadness beyond simple articulations of blame or relief.

In the next section, I situate my thinking about sadness within the larger bodies of literature on education, emotion, and psychoanalysis. From there, I engage the process of *currere* in conversation with *Wildlife.* I begin, as does the album, in speaking of loss and storying my own sadness. I then discuss the idea of coping with loss before moving into a discussion of death and concluding in hope. The structure of this essay, thus, follows the form of *Wildlife* closely and loosely corresponds to the four moments of *currere* (Pinar, 1994).

EMOTION AND EDUCATION

Historically, educational theory and practice have been disengaged from emotion, focusing more on the social and intellectual development of students. Feminist theorizing challenged this exclusion of emotion from education (e.g., hooks, 1994), as did Paulo Freire's (1997) foundational emphasis on radical love and Daniel Goleman's (1997) work on emotional intelligence. Recent trends around social and emotional learning (Humphrey et al., 2020), the role of emotions in social justice education (Boler, 1999), and the affective turn in education (Dernikos et al., 2020) have followed suit.

Since the Reconceptualization in the 1970s, curriculum studies has worked alongside many of these trends, and *currere* specifically has been one of the key spaces in which the emotional dimensions of education have been, and continue to be, explored. Recent articles in the *Currere Exchange Journal*, for example, have noted the emotionally satisfying charge of *currere*'s synthetic moment (Noreiga-Mundaroy, 2021), the socio-pedagogical significance of witnessing students' emotions (Googins, 2021), and the push and pull of anxieties and intimacies amid the COVID-19 pandemic (Mayoh-Bauche, 2021). Both curriculum studies and *currere*, however, continue to be misunderstood outside the field (Morris, 2019) and maintain limited influence on public schooling. Thus, while the above trends have generated valuable language for discussing the emotional lives of teachers and students, there remains a normativity attached to positive emotion in schools. Indeed, the goal of both emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1997) and emotional literacy (Humphrey et al., 2020) seems to be the management and alleviation of negative emotion. This normative positivity is sometimes strategically mobilized to silence critiques of racism (DiAngelo, 2021; Matias, 2016; Saul, 2021b) and serious discussions about unpleasant realities, such as the likelihood of dystopian climate change (Saul, 2021a). In effect, the desire to keep education a positive experience for everyone works to silence those who do not see or experience it as such.

Again, *currere* proves the exception to this tacit (sometimes toxic) positivity, as one recent article explicitly suggested that teachers ought not to try and resolve student emotion, but rather serve as a witness to those emotions (Googins, 2021). Indeed, *currere* can be a sort of witnessing—a witnessing through writing of the self making sense of itself. The current paper, then, seeks to witness the curriculum of everyday sadness.

Here, I am specifically interested in sadness, which is distinct from the clinical term "depression" by virtue of the former's shorter, though often recursive, timeframe. Essentially, I am concerned with mourning rather than melancholia in the Freudian sense (Freud, 2005; see also Mitchell & Black, 2016). Depression, or melancholia, is a serious

condition, with severe cases showing a lack of agency over one's perceptions of reality. Sadness, or mourning, is temporary—though haunting—and usually linked to a specific loss. I am, however, not convinced that there are always clearly observable delineations between these terms. I, thus, turn to the psychoanalytic literature beyond Freud toward a broader view of psychological issues, treating one's internal landscape as a unique entity rather than an easily categorized clinical presentation (Mitchell & Black, 2016).

Within the psychoanalytic literature, different framings of depression and sadness exist. Melanie Klein, for example, posited that ego development happened in two stages: the paranoid-schizoid and the depressive (Segal, 1973). Non-psychotic adults move between these phases, and problems arise only when one gets stuck. The depressive position, which has more to do with sadness than depression *per se*, takes on a recursive quality throughout our lives: "The depressive position is never fully worked through. The anxieties pertaining to ambivalence and guilt, as well as situations of loss, which reawaken depressive experiences, are always with us" (Segal, 1973, p. 80). In other words, as with most psychoanalytic frameworks (Mitchell & Black, 2016), formative experiences in our childhood provide a map for understanding subsequent experience, and loss events in adulthood can reawaken the experiences of loss in childhood.

Often seen as an orthodox voice in psychoanalysis, Charles Brenner (1982) suggested the mapping of previous experience, inclusive of conscious and unconscious thought, onto the present moment as one half of what makes affect.[2] He defines this "idea" as a category that includes "memories, mental representations of objects, mental representations of one's own physical sensations, etc." (Brenner, 1982, p. 43). With negative affect, a distinction can be made between affects rooted in a fear of what might be, such as anxiety, and affects associated with things that have already happened, such as misery or discontent. The second half of Brenner's framework is sensation, which can be divided into pleasure and unpleasure and can also be described by magnitude. An intense unpleasure leads to a different affect than a mild unpleasure. Sadness can be thusly understood as a *mildly* unpleasurable affect with ideational inspiration in the having been.

Beyond psychoanalysis, I also understand emotion as a socio-cultural phenomenon. Specifically, Sara Ahmed (2014) offers an avenue to make sense of the way emotions disperse among groups and how certain emotions "stick" more than others. Though not explicitly discussed by Ahmed, sadness, in this social framing, can be understood as not only happening inside the individual, but also in and through their interactions with other bodies and as intensifying through repeated interactions.

These myriad frameworks for understanding emotion all inform my thinking. I have offered some discussion of them toward situating this paper within a larger conversation. In the next section, I begin the work of *currere*.

Loss

My *currere* process always begins with freewriting in a notebook—notes, poems, long sections of stream of consciousness prose. When I sit down at the computer to write the papers that result from this free writing, I tend to frame *currere* as a storytelling process. I often ask myself something like: "What stories focus the thoughts emergent from the free writing?"

At all stages of the *currere* story told in this paper, the personal is echoed, evoked, and enhanced through conversation with the album *Wildlife*. *Wildlife* is narratively framed as a collection of short stories and monologues penned by a single author—

the narrator (they/them). The narrator begins each of *Wildlife*'s four sections with a monologue, then shares a series of stories upon which they also offer commentary.

Wildlife's first section deals with loss. The opening track, "a Departure,"[3] features the narrator questioning their sanity. They suggest they are absent minded and preoccupied with death. The narrator carries on saying that they hadn't always felt this way, but then there came a loss, which the narrator frames as a departure. The narrator leaves the precise quality of this departure up for interpretation. In interviews, lyricist Jordan Dreyer (2012) has said that he wanted the loss to be ambiguous, allowing the listener to see themselves in it.

In this departure, I do see my own. The memories are scattered and disjointed but visceral. I remember sitting in my grade eight art classroom, defending myself from insults and physical attacks of people I thought were my friends. I remember the teacher's silence. I remember leaving the room without permission and wandering the halls. I remember sitting on a curb outside the school crying. I remember feeling like, and identifying as, a social outcast. I remember never feeling safe or happy in school after that.

The three narrative tracks in the opening section of the album, "Harder Harmonies," "St. Paul Missionary Baptist Church Blues," and "Edit Your Hometown," offer stories that echo my own. "Harder Harmonies" depicts a gifted artist who is unable to make their life work outside of their art. "St. Paul" paints an image of a church, once a vibrant community, now fallen into disrepair. "Hometown" tells the story of an older man who is bitter about never having left his hometown, and the narrator wonders if they are the same—if both dwell too long on loss.

Here, there are reverberations too. I remember all the things I couldn't make work—relationships, careers, images of myself—and how the sense of loss that came with those things led to a near obsessional consideration of what might have been. Indeed, my whole first year of teaching was marked by a dwelling on the ending of a relationship that directly preceded the beginning of my contract. I didn't know how to be a teacher that first year. I didn't know how to be me. I hadn't yet recovered from the myriad losses that marked my teacher training, and despite the façade of happiness I presented to students, my eyes stayed sad.

Analytically, the opening section of *Wildlife* begs the question of whether sadness always has a departure. Most classically-oriented psychoanalysts would say yes—it is the imprint of childhood through which we come to understand our subsequent experiences, particularly loss. There is always a departure, but that departure happens much before we are aware. The departure in *Wildlife*, then, is a reactivation of a primary loss, and my sadness today, yesterday, and tomorrow is a lingering reactivation of a departure made in my teenage years—or earlier, in childhood. As suggested through Klein above, these reactivations are normative rather than exceptional.

COPING

The second section of *Wildlife* depicts the pull toward relief from sadness through different coping mechanisms. The monologue that begins the second section, "a Letter," responds directly to the first section's emphasis on loss with the narrator detailing the reasons they haven't been able to move on from their departure. The song's last line, however, questions whether the narrator ever tried at all and seems to suggest a new or renewed willingness to move on, to try again.

The two narrative songs in the second section, "Safe in the Forest" and "The Most Beautiful Bitter Fruit," show attempts at coping with loss. "Forest" depicts two extremes of social engagement: isolation and immersion. At the beginning of the song, the speaker moves out of town to an isolated area before returning to a city and surrounding themselves with community at the end of the song. "Most Beautiful" deals in temporary physical connection and, more precisely, sexual fantasy: "was our touch half as sacred as I made it seem, or just another fabrication of a half dream" (La Dispute, 2011d, 3:01). In an interview on the song, Dreyer (2012) said that it could really be about anything with which one becomes infatuated after loss: work, a relationship, or drugs. Reflecting on the second section of the album, Dreyer (2012) expressed uncertainty about whether these coping strategies are necessarily bad, only that that they distract from the issue at hand. Indeed, while necessary, relief is only ever temporary, and recovery is never absolute; the imprint of loss remains felt throughout the body and the mind (Downey, 2021).

I've tried to cope with my sadness and loss through isolation. For several years, I lived and worked in a remote Northern community. I spent most of those years trying to "figure myself out," reading books, and generally avoiding any sort of social gathering. That time was meaningful for me, and at the end of it, I did feel happy for a time. But eventually the sadness returned. New losses, both conscious and unconscious, brought me back to those formative experiences of outsiderness. There wasn't an escape, only temporary relief.

Seeking relief from sadness, then, is something akin to coping with loss—it may be necessary at certain points in our lives, but ultimately it doesn't help us to integrate the experience into who we are. That integration, I suggest, is the true future found in sadness—the progressive (Pinar, 1994) vision of my sadness's curriculum.

Death

The third section of *Wildlife* deals with death. In the section's opening monologue, "a Poem," the narrator wrestles with whether their personal pain is significant or if, because it is self-inflicted in the narrator's eyes, it somehow loses its significance. The monologue also functions as a response to the coping mechanisms in the second section, where the narrator wants and turns toward death as the ultimate loss and potentially a source of true relief from suffering: "Only death unimpeded, not slowing it's pace, brings that petty, old worry and wonder away" (La Dispute, 2011b, 2:42).

The three narratives in the third section are elaborate and vivid stories of traumatic tragedy, all derived from Dreyer's (2012) real-life experiences. The first song, "King Park," tells the story of a gang-related drive-by resulting in the death of an unaffiliated child. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that the shooter was only 20 years old. He barricades himself in a hotel room and shouts through the door at his uncle, who is trying to talk the shooter into giving himself up. In his emotional plea, the shooter wonders if he can be forgiven for the murder, asking, "Can I still get into heaven if I kill myself?" (La Dispute, 2011c, 6:20). The song concludes with the narrator leaving, not wanting to know how the scene ends. The next song, "Edward Benz, 27 Times," shares the story of a man, Edward, whose son is severely mentally ill. The song comes to a climax when the son locks himself inside his house, with his mother on the outside rushing to the pharmacy to get his perception refilled—pills the son had stopped taking because they made him sleep too much. The father arrives at the house and forces his way in, where the son stabs him 27 times. Miraculously, the father survives, and the son is taken away

by police. At the end of the song, the narrator looks at the depth of this tragedy and of Edward's resolve to continue caring for his family, including his son, and finds no words to respond. The final song in the third section, "I See Everything," depicts a teacher sharing personal journal entries from when she lost her son to cancer. The climax of the song occurs rapidly: after several entries where the son's health improves, there are a rapid series of entries that suggest things are getting worse, culminating in the son's death. The song ends with the narrator comparing their pain to that of the child and the other characters in this section, ultimately finding their own pain lacking.

The songs in this section are, for me, the most evocative on the album. They are the songs that drew me in and inspired me to write this paper. Before doing any research, I heard them as songs of everyday tragedy—heartbreaking stories without clear blame or easy relief. These sufferings had no reason, and that has stayed with me. After listening to the record repeatedly and searching out interviews about it, I am still struck by the songs, and they leave me with the same unnameable emotion that they always have. It is perhaps the same feeling the narrator has at the end of "I See Everything"—an empathetic speechlessness, a simultaneous emptiness and fullness, a quiet contemplative pause. None of these descriptors name it precisely, so I have taken to calling it sadness. This sadness is not unlike the sadness that has followed me throughout my life, but here it is shared with others through witnessing. In that, I find a community of everyday sadness—a community of people grieving loss, however ambiguous—and my own sadness seems lighter.

A few years ago, I was on my way to a conference. I had arrived late because of flight cancelations, and the shuttle I had booked was already gone. Without an additional fee, a driver agreed to take me the two hours outside of the city where the conference was being held. I thanked him profusely, and he said it wasn't a problem—he lived in that area anyway. We talked in easy and relaxed tones throughout the drive, and gradually he started to tell me about his challenges with gambling addiction. In turn, I shared some of my own struggles. When we arrived, I thanked him again, both for the ride and for the conversation—I already knew it would stay with me.

What I felt after that two-hour drive was the same thing I feel when I listen to the songs in the third section of *Wildlife.* It is, I think, possibly the same emotion that compels Marla Morris (2019), after sharing her own journey with ovarian cancer, to write "dying of terminal cancer brings nothing, nothingness" (p. 10), thus, bucking the pull toward the redemptive arch of emotional recovery so common in education life writing and the corresponding trend toward normative positivity in schools. Nothingness, grief, sadness, empathetic contemplation—call it what you will, it has been where I have learned the most about what it means to be alive.

Hope

Wildlife closes off with a fourth section about hope. The monologue, "a Broken Jar," is a moment of clarity for the narrator, who can see that their whole life has been defined by, or structured in response to, a particular loss. With that clarity, however, there is still lingering uncertainty about how to move forward. In that way, "a Broken Jar," functions as a transition from the songs about death into those about hope.

The two songs that conclude the album, "all our bruised bodies and the whole heart shrinks" and "You and I in Unison," combine the narrator's voice and elements of narrative. "bruised bodies" suggests a universality to suffering: "Have you had a moment [that] forced the whole heart to grow or retract?" (La Dispute, 2011a, 1:03), and

the suggestion is that we all have. There is a moment in the middle of the song where the narrator flirts with the edges of nihilism, and at the end of the song, this seems a distinct possibility—that the narrator may end up only seeing meaninglessness in suffering. "You and I in Unison," however, alleviates this tension and brings the record—and the narrator's struggle with loss—to a close with the acceptance that "everybody has to let go someday" (La Dispute, 2011e, 3:02). The narrator isn't there yet—nor perhaps am I—and indeed, letting go isn't a total goodbye as much as an integration of the experience into who we are now: "Until I die, I will sing our names in unison" (La Dispute, 2011e, 3:55).

As above, I think that integration is a version of what is proposed in the synthetic moment of *currere*. The outcome of this writing, then, is that my sadness isn't something from which I am trying to recover, nor something I want to cope with or escape from. It is a part of me, and the work I am about—the course I am running—is to try and integrate it into my understanding of who I am.

Sadness and other discomforts need to be brought into the fold of who we are. We can't do that alone. We need others to help witness us (Googins, 2021) and sometimes to let us know what they see—to mirror back what we look or sound like. This, I think, is the task of a teacher. I use the word teacher here in a broad sense, and I am thinking about education not in the limited bureaucratic ways to which we have become accustomed. Indeed, I am thinking about education in the possible, not in the actual.

The actuality of education is, by definition, rather restrictive. So too was it in Freud's day. Indeed, Freud saw psychoanalysis as an "after education," something undertaken to deal with the repressions we experience in our upbringing (Britzman, 2021). Today, I think of the way certain topics are off limits in education and the way certain conversations are policed for their tone (Saad, 2020; Saul, 2021b). I think of this more broadly as the necessity of keeping education a positive space for all—the stickiness (Ahmed, 2014) of positive emotion in education.

Death, for example, is rarely discussed in public education despite more than 20 years of literature calling for its inclusion in the scope of curriculum (e.g., Durant, 2018; Pinar, 1992; Wass, 2004). Death is a part of human life and a significant factor in the meaning of human existence (Braidotti, 2013), yet public education remains disengaged from it. Part of the reason death isn't discussed in education is because there is a history of it not being a pleasant thing to talk about, especially with children. It is, thus, one manifestation of the idea that education need not look at the ugliness of human existence unless it is historically significant, like the holocaust.

Saul (2021a) offers another example in the likelihood of dystopian climate change. For Saul, public schooling seems unwilling to address the bleak possibilities of our planetary future. The same old myth of hard work yielding security is perpetuated in education despite the evidence that such a future is unrealistic and that we are much more likely living at the doorstep of dystopia, as Saul puts it. I would add to Saul's analysis that the failure to engage the realities climate change is a result of the same sticky positive emotion that disallows meaningful discussion of death in the classroom.

That sticky positivity also silences conversations about racism in some contexts. In another paper, Saul (2021b) names this as the "niceness" problem of education. The problem with niceness is that it rejects the specificity of naming harm to protect the feelings of people involved. Such is often the case in dealing with instances of racism. A person feels wronged by a racist incident or remark and comes forward to discuss it. The wronged person is specific in their use of terms like "anti-black" or "anti-

Indigenous" racism, but the response from the institution is codified in the language of multiculturalism, inclusivity, and mutual respect. Frustrated, the wronged person leaves the situation rolling their eyes. Such a case is described by Saul and by many others daily.

Some name this stickiness an extension of toxic positivity. I see it as an overarching necessity of maintaining positivity in schooling. The psychological mechanisms behind this positivity are more intricate than I can discuss here, but I suspect a large part of it has to do with the progressive inheritance of education, stemming from John Dewey and earlier Herbert Spencer (Egan, 2003). Education is always oriented toward the future and, as such, it is sometimes ignorant of its present realities, especially when those realities shake its very foundations.

Wildlife teaches that there is beauty in the difficult things in life—the things that force our hearts to grow or shrink. It also teaches that we can't run from our losses, nor smother them in infatuation. Most importantly, it teaches that we aren't alone in our suffering. Education can take a lesson from this. We can't run from the realities of the now any more than we can pretend that our students don't get sad sometimes. If we choose to engage the negative more directly, we can emerge, just like the narrator of *Wildlife*, better for the having been.

I look back at the teenager who walked through the halls of his high school feeling unsafe and afraid as the same person who walked through the halls of his first practicum school with sad eyes. That person is the same person who, today, walks through the hallways of a university looking frustrated, preoccupied, and perplexed—the same person who still feels like an outsider in most situations. My sadness isn't going anywhere; the imprint of sadness will always be there. It is a part of me.

As to the question that began this paper: "Is it ever appropriate to show sadness as a teacher," I think it's time we answered that in the affirmative, if not to start unsticking positive emotion from education, then to show our students that it is a normal part of human existence to feel sad.

I remember a morning in my grade six class where we were asked to teach lessons on emotional intelligence. The activity—not of my design—was for students to decorate a leaf and then pin it on our "tree of feelings" on the branch that most closely spoke to their daily emotional norm. In my class of 17, the happy branch was overburdened with leaves, and one lonely leaf was pinned to the sad branch. I watched as the student pinned it there. They turned to me afterwards and asked, "Why does everyone feel happy all the time?" It was a genuine puzzlement, a rare moment when the interior lives of others were displayed externally and where the student's own internal landscape was measured as different.

I opened my mouth to respond, but the recess bell rang, and chairs began to rustle with commotion. I got up to ensure that materials were put away, and when I looked back, the student's gaze lingered, and perhaps my memory fades, but I thought I saw loneliness there.

When the students returned from recess, my own leaf, newly decorated, was quietly pinned to the sad branch.

We never talked about it. I never told that student how true I was being to myself in that moment; I never saw the opportunity, but if I had the moment back, I might tell them, "Yes, I feel sad much of the time too."

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Endnotes

[1] At the time of recording *Wildlife*, the members of La Dispute were Jordan Dryer, Kevin Whittemore, Chad Sterenberg, Adam Vass, and Brad Vander Lugt. Additional recording personnel can be found at the following url: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wildlife_(La_Dispute_album). The album is available for purchase and streaming at the following url: https://ladispute.bandcamp.com/album/wildlife-2.

[2] In this paper, I use affect and emotion somewhat interchangeably following the individual author's usage. I do so in full awareness of, and perhaps resistance to, the distinctions that have been drawn between these terms (see also Ahmed, 2014).

[3] Capitalization of the title for each song follows the convention of the album.