# Centering Black Excellence: Critical Race *Currere*

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As we entered the year 2022, our attention began to shift. Instagram, once saturated with Black squares, now hosted winter pictures, holiday photos, and glee. Not to say I was entirely free from this; my last few posts were exactly that. I think back to the year we put behind us and remember the activism, the protests, and vitriol. The shift in our public discourse away from the persistent and ongoing threat of anti-Black racism is far from indicative of our need to remain silent. Last year, for example, in Windsor, Ontario (La Grassa, 2021), Barrie, Ontario (Krause, 2021, November 12), and Toronto (Jabakhanji, 2021), instances of Anti-Black racism continued to resurface and remain, in many cases, insufficiently addressed. With the new year on the horizon, I couldn't help feeling like we'd driven through 2021 woefully unprepared for any collective resolution. In the United States, there was even a push to remove any semblance of Critical Race Theory in K-12, as well as college, classrooms (Knowles, 2021). I now feel a very real, tangible fear at the imminent threat of losing the little space in between the curricular cracks (Schultz, 2017) I have left to advocate for my existence.

So, I am here, writing, perhaps as a response to this fear of the existence of my Black body in a pedagogically white space. I take a *currerian* journey in relation to my lived experiences with co-designing and teaching the Sankofa Centre of Black Excellence curriculum. In traversing this journey, I draw on critical race theory (CRT) and William Pinar's (1975, 2004) *currere* methodology to dissect and (re)interpret the autobiographical racialized self, to situate "*I"* and ask about the possibilities of *currere's* role in antiracism education. At times, I draw upon poetry I create or have created during my *currerian* journey. Like other *currere* scholars (Daspit, 2021; Woodford, 2021), I do this to analyze and synthesize my autobiographical academic experience in its many existing forms. In doing so, I highlight the importance of Critical Race *Currere* concerning curriculum studies and a Canadian education system. At times, my steps through Pinar's (1975, 2004) *currere* may seem obvious and explicit. At other times I move across these steps more subtly to evoke a closeness to my own experience and lean away from any dominating epistemological structural inhibitions.

## *Currere*

Dauphenee's (2010) study has looked at how a writer, though seeking to describe one's own experience, is bound by the academic lens and all of its expectations. Baszile (2015) refers to this as "epistemological dimensions of domination" (p. 3). *Currere* offers further possibilities in that it asks the researcher to remain mindful of our point of view in relation to all external expectations and look at it, loosen ourselves from it, detach from it, and bracket it (Pinar, 1975).

The symbolism behind the course that has inspired this piece, The Sankofa Centre of Excellence, and the eponymous creature are best reflected in *currere*'s ideological wrestling of time. Like Pinar's articulation of *currere* as an allegory of the present, the Sankofa bird represents returning to the past and to the present as one reimagines the future. San (return) Ko (Go) Fa (Look, seek, and take), from the Akan, Ghanian language translates literally to "it is not taboo to fetch what is at risk of being left behind" (Carter G. Woodson Center, 2021). Similarly, Pinar's (2004) *currere* understands time as that

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which can bridge connections among those who practice it and the potential of one's pedagogy. Pinar (2004) notes "It is the past that can dislodge us from submersion in the present, and its articulation can serve as an allegory-of-the-present. No longer a flat line between what is no more and can never be" (p. 27). In my currerian praxis, I remember, and I look back, like the Sankofa bird, and seek wisdom from that which can reimagine my and my students' futures as Black excellence.

### Critical Race/Feminist *Currere*

The challenge for myself is that the *currerian* conversations generated around the pursuit of self-understanding take place primarily around "ideas, concepts, and texts that emerge almost exclusively from the male psyche, from the white psyche, from the white male psyche" (Baszile, 2015, p. 2). In 2015, Baszile published "Critical Race/Feminist *Currere*," which posited the need to center the voices of women of colour, in academic domains. These voices, Baszile (2015) notes, are those that "have been absent, ignored, misconstrued, distorted, repressed in the curriculums that shape our lives, the curricula of schooling and media, in particular" (p. 2). I ask, what is my lived experience as a Canadian Black educator creating a course for/with/by Black students? How do their/our stories and experiences coalesce, harmonize at the intersection of excellence? What moments in their lives, in their/our schooling, have been silenced and pushed aside systemically? "What racializing laws, rules, and norms [are] woven into the social system?" (Henry & Tator, 2000, p. 373). bell hooks (1994/2014) notes in *Teaching to Transgress* that, to (re)enact antiracism in schools, we must begin with the student's lived experience. hooks notes, "Seeing the classroom always as a communal place enhances the likelihood of collective effort in creating and sustaining a learning community" (p. 8). Simply put, Critical Race *Currere* invites a dialogue between two theoretical schools of thought and practice: Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Curriculum Studies. By bringing these fields together, one hopes that we can bring race, knowledge, and power back into conversation with the self and our lived experiences (Baszile, 2015). There is a poem that comes to mind, written by a local Prince Edward Island artist and activist King Kxndi on the importance of honouring Black and Indigenous women across the globe. They write:

> For we make life. For we started life.
> Therefore we understand life.
> Black womxn are your foremothers,
> Indigenous womxn carry the world's Indigenous wisdom we so desperately need to get us into the next world.
> The path to saving the Mothership, Earth, including protecting the Oceans, Whales, and Forests. It equally includes protecting Black, Indigenous Womxn of Colour Globally (Kxndi, 2021, p. 1)

Okello (2019), has looked at the ways Black men ethically engage with afro-feminism(s) through auto/ethnography. She notes that, although the primary concern of feminism is not to "rescue" Black heterosexual cis-gendered men, "men's ethical participation in and with Black feminisms can assist in creating the alternative ways of being that Black feminisms call for and may facilitate communal healing projects in and beyond educative spaces" (Okello, 2019, p. 343). Though I don't identify as heterosexual and my cis-ness remains interrogated, I ask about the possibilities for

Black feminism to continue to facilitate my engagement with *currere* and ultimately my pedagogy. I write, as I teach, to actively dismantle and decolonize my thinking through the process of *currere* and question how my autobiographical pursuits can/must include making space for not only antiracism but feminism.

## Regressive: Nowhere to Hide, Yet Still Unseen

"Good morning Aaron," another teacher walks by me in the staff room as I return to the present. I wear only dress clothes here. I've tightened my hair back in an imperceptibly curly bun, sure to have flattened out any stray curls from my temples—the likes of which I would have called endearing any other day—now they are exposing, inconspicuously Black. I lean on what Downey (2018) refers to as my White Seeming Privilege in an effort to "fit in." I smile behind my medical mask and head to my class. I can still feel the gel in my hair 13 years later.

At home, my scalp aches from the day, and so I untie my hair—free from any perception. I open my laptop to continue to work on the papers I've been assigned for my curriculum studies course. Every time I write, I think of George, and I think of the recent protests after the murder of Abdirahman Abdi in Ottawa, Ontario. I think of the uprising of anti-Black racism, and I struggle to find the words. As I think back to this day, I'm reminded of James Baldwin (1963) and his letter to his nephew: "Dear James, I have written this letter five times, and I have torn it up five times" (p. 3). Baszile (2010) cites similar struggles in her writing:

> I had not figured it out yet, my trouble with getting it out in a way that moves beyond the basic requirement of being informative, contributing something thoughtful to the field. After an hour or so, the word that I have erased several times now comes out again, it refuses—it seems—to go away, to be silenced. The word is *I*. (p. 486)

## Sankofa Centre of Excellence

The Sankofa Centre of Excellence, also referred to as the Sankofa Summer English Course, was initially proposed as a Black Graduation Mentorship program in 2019 after a $157 million investment from the Ontario Ministry of Education. Nine school boards across Ontario were chosen for this pilot program to provide mechanisms of culturally responsive support for Black youth in Canadian schools. Led and supported by members of the school board's teaching and administrative team, the Sankofa Centre prides itself on its focus on well-being and learning for Black youth in Ottawa (Ottawa-Carleton District School Board, 2022). "The Sankofa Centre of Excellence was created to 'address issues and concerns that impact the graduation rates of Black students in the district' and provide culturally responsive ways to align the individual experiences of Black youth" in these schools with the planned curriculum while combating micro and macro ways racisms may manifest in education (Ng-A-Fook & Curie, 2021, p. 19).

In the Sankofa Centre of Excellence, we as educators and curriculum designers found ways to return to the question of "who am I?" and "how has my understanding of Black Excellence changed or evolved?" to center the curriculum as lived (Aoki, 1993) amongst the curriculum-as-planned. How might this centre work to facilitate CRT's counter-narratives (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017)? How might these voices fill in or take spaces amongst the incomplete narratives (Cordi, 2021) and honour the lived experiences CRT seeks to accompany? In Sankofa, space is held that allows room for our students' lived experiences but does so with all necessary considerations—namely a curriculum that reflects our collective needs.

### Progressive: I Can't Hear Your Racism, I'm Busy Retexturing Landscapes

"Mr. S, how do you confront microaggressions?" one of my students asked me one day about a week into our month-long course. I was assigned to a group of 13 bright students, all of whom identified as Black and who had all expressed eagerness at engaging in conversations about their lived experiences as racialized youth. For many, having their curriculum-as-lived (Aoki, 1993) welcomed into the curriculum-as-planned was novel. I had spent so long doing what Brian D. Schultz (2017) refers to as "Teaching in the Cracks," finding opportunities to work in between the mandated, racializing curriculum that such an explicitly forward question had taken me aback (Coble, 2020, Stanley, 2000). It had dawned on me in the vacuous moments of silence after I was asked that question that I had spent so long away from what Maxwell and Roofe (2020) refer to as the "Heart of the Protest" that any semblance of an enacted curriculum as lived would require more than a simple answer. "When curriculum is understood as being constructed narratively through the construction and reconstruction of experience, what is valued are the stories lived and told by teachers and students of what is important, meaningful, relevant, and problematic for them" (Maxwell & Roofe, 2020, p. 28). I opened up the conversation to the class, inviting responses the likes of which only further silenced me. Here, among the "retextured landscapes, populated by a multiplicity of curricula," I am reminded of the curriculum-as-lived and how it transforms teacher to learner and creates space for the faces of "faceless people" (Aoki, 1993, p. 258).

At this progressive point in the currerian journey, I think more of identity and the deconstruction of the terminology of it all. I think of Aoki's (1993) reconsiderations of identity as presence, this notion that identity—in our case Blackness—is a static, present identity. It is the other side of the binary, the other side of the rigged coin—unequal probabilities fated against this flip. We are aware in the Sankofa class that our identities are in production "in the throes of being constituted as we live in places of difference" (Aoki, 1993, p. 260). For Dumas (2016), it is a shared set of "histories, cultural processes, and imagined and performed kinships" (pp. 12–13). For James (2019), it is breaking out of the perceived constructs of Blackness, taking a deep and unguarded sigh at not being perceived as present identities, as "disrupters, trouble-makers, lawbreakers" (p. 384). In the Sankofa class, we have deep and meaningful conversations about what it means to be Black in a world that at one time denies the existence of Blackness and in the same breath shackles us to it. We no longer need to hold our breath at the prevailing white utterances of colour-Blindness (Hampton, 2010). Rather, we know "no amount of intellectual gymnastics and skirting around issues can evade or deny the powerful social and political currency of race" (Dei, 2000, p. 14). We know that ignoring our struggles is not a way to leave room for excellence.

### *Currere* in Sankofa Center of Excellence

We travel through time in this curriculum. The Sankofa Summer English course contains five units. In Unit 1: The Power of Your Pen, we look at what Black Excellence means to us as Canadians of African descent. It asks us to consider the challenges and adversities faced by Black Canadians, such as Marie Joseph Angelique, Harriet Tubman, Mary Ann Shad, and Carrie Best. We are introduced to the concept of resilience in relation to our ancestors and the path they have carved for us. Regressive, remember "we return to the past, to capture it as it was, and as it hovers over the present" (Pinar, 1975, p. 21). In Unit 2: The Power of Your Voice, we learn about Dudley Laws, Keosha Love, d'bi

Young, ProofRock ShadowRunner, and other Canadian activists, spoken word artists, and artists who have used their voices to imagine possibilities for the future. Students are given the opportunity to write a speech while thinking about the future they want to create. Progressive, "we look the other way. We look, in Sartre's language, at what is not yet the case, what is not yet present" (Pinar, 1975, p. 24). In Unit 3: Short Stories Resistance and Triumph and the 4th Unit: Brother - Novel Studies, we begin to look at Black Resistance through stories. In this unit, we begin to analyze how stories and their structures allow us to understand our present, our past, and our future by reading African folklore, Jamaica Kincaid, David Chariandy, and Lawrence Hill. In these units, we analyze how plot and story act as a collective imagination while bracketing our past, situating our present, and declaring our future. Finally, in Unit 5: Media Studies, we learn about the tools to bring our learning together and synthesize. In this unit, we work with a production company to answer the question, "What does Black Excellence Mean To Me?" "to underline the biological concreteness of being. Who is that? In your voice, what is the meaning of the present" (Pinar, 1975, p. 26)?

**Synthetical**

When I was 9 years old, I asked my Trinidadian Granny a question she thought was in jest, and just in an instant, she insisted I ingest my worry and ask her my query.
I pulled out the chair and looked up at her hair. Black curls, like mine, spun me in time, I would stare in the mirror and question my skin.

I sat beside her and asked, "Granny are we Black?"
The Sardinha smile is our strongest trait see,
And in that moment
I realized that we, and the entire family smile from our eyes like blinding sun's on the sea
Unlike our ancestors our smiles are free.
So we smile like it's our currency.

She laughed just like so,
and pulled me close
Maybe the answer was so
obvious to her,
But I wasn't sure
see
I could count nights from before
Where I'd stare at the floor
And I beg for skin covered clarity
"Half Black - Half white"
So binary like red/white wine is very sweet for some but unpalatable to many.
This racial ambiguity begs to ponder some too blind to nuance for wonder.

Though bi-racial, I am singly racialized. Though mixed, I am whole. Though half, I am no longer fragmented. Like Fanon's (1952) Black consciousness, my Blackness claims "absolute density, full of itself" (p. 114), "I am not a potentiality of something; I am fully what I am." (p. 115). I look around my class and see my students of the Sankofa summer course in their fullness, their absolute Blackness. I rid myself of the

racializing language of "academia's dominant epistemological paradigm" (Baszile, 2010, p, 488), the "lure of Western epistemology" (Aoki, 1993, p. 256), striating our curricular landscapes and the language upon which we traverse its elitism and exclusions (Baszile, 2010; Stanley, 2000). Our ontological pursuit is, in itself, not onto us. Terms that divide me, which subjugate and categorize our skin, these are not our words (Karklis & Badger, 2015), not our language of otherness (Ibrahim, 2017). This is an onto-epistemological dilemma of the Black body and mind. All I see are smiles in this class, gratitude at a curriculum that reflects their lived experience (Aoki, 1993). We read Viola Desmond and Desmond Cole, learn of Mary Ann Shad and Dudley Laws, we think about Black Excellence in its many forms, in our media, in our queerness, in our art, poetry, and dance, and most importantly we circle back to two questions presented to us. First, Pinar's (1975) question asks, "What has been and what is now the nature of my educational experience?" (p. 20). And, Baszile (2015) asks, "Who am I?" (p. 119). We are aware of its difficulty: speaking and thinking beyond and outside of the language domination (Baszile, 2015). Yet as Adams and Buffington-Adams (2020) call for in "On/Beyond *Currere*," this transformative and collaborative process must continue to hold the mirror up, "no matter how painful the experience or how bitter the knowledge" (p. 68). We talk about our pasts, we ponder its meaning, we think about our future, and we come together. We synthesize to imagine the possibilities of our excellence.

## Conclusion

It's September 2022, and during this year I made the conscious decision to leave the school board behind. Explicit and implicit acts of racial violence exist in every corner of every school I visit, as if mandated in the curriculum. I work at a non-profit now on the east coast of Canada. Here, I work with the Black community to create Black curriculum and programming. I'm happy. I spent so much of my life wanting to be a teacher, not knowing that being an educator is what would bring me safety, comfort, and resilience.

If, as Pinar (2004) points out, curriculum theory is concerned with the educational significance of "school subjects for self and society in the ever-changing historical moment" (p. 16) and other curriculum theorists are right in noting that curriculum is a critical social/political/historical project) then how might curriculum theory benefit from a commitment to intersecting CRT with our present reality? How might teachers within these schools benefit from such reflection? Such onto-epistemological intersections have been acknowledged elsewhere (Downey, 2018). Yet, as it stands, more research is needed at the life-writing crossroads of these intersections. If, as Downey (2018) notes, our diffused agencies can renew *currere*'s potential for social and political change, then let us listen to the changing and ever-present voices of advocates, teachers, and educators across the globe asking for that change. Though Sankofa gazes back to gain wisdom from the past, we learn and continue onward, flying forward as we "aim towards freedom" (Pinar, 1975, p. 22).

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