Crinoline: Systemic Racism Challenges Teacher Preparation

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The presence of African American teachers and professors benefits all students. Roughly 6% of African Americans in the United States have doctoral degrees (Hussar et al., 2020). Less than 3% teach in colleges and universities (Hussar et al., 2020). Many students never see African American teachers in their P-12 classrooms. Few university students have had the opportunity to learn from African American professors (Edwards & Ross, 2018). The low number of African American teachers and professors and their distribution across schools and communities helps to support the myth of white supremacy. But numbers and claims of lack of familiarity cannot account for the persistence of anti-black racism in U.S. classrooms. When numbers and distribution are coupled with racist misinformation about affirmative action and other mechanisms intended to mitigate historical injustice and injury, white university students readily challenge the credentials of African American women professors (Evans-Winters & Hines, 2020; McCoy-Wilson, 2020) and even verbally call on classmates in real time to question the value of learning from an African American woman professor (Parker & Neville, 2019).

Whether I physically walk onto campus or enter an electronic classroom, I know I'm entering a space where equity is ambiguous, flimsy. Being African American and being a woman teaching in university is hard and demanding. Teaching means entering terrain where at any moment I'll be morally compromised—a space where I will suffer moral injury for the sake of "the lie" (Glaude, 2020), another "face at the bottom of the well" (Bell, 1992). The notion that African American women professors are teaching in universities because we somehow forced our way into a place we do not belong, a place that rightfully belongs to a white person, is a real and powerful white supremacist narrative. In addition to teaching subject matter content, as an African American woman professor, I am burdened with the necessity of continually justifying my presence. It does not matter whether I wish to address racial injustice or not; my students make white supremacist narratives part of their learning content. Institutional structures, colleagues, administrators, and staff promulgate anti-black racism and enact it alongside students (Finley et al., 2018; King & Watts, 2004). On the first page of *The Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois (1903) states: "Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it … . How does it feel to be a problem?" *Currere* presupposes the process of learning from and through one's experiences. Following Pinar (1975b) I ask myself, "How does it feel to be uprooted from the geographical, social, and psychological ambiance in which I live my day-to-day life?" (p. 399).

Regression – Time and Distance to See

Some years ago, a university administrator entered my classroom and asked where she could set up her computer to write her unscheduled observation of my teaching. I wasn't entirely surprised, but I was disappointed. I was angered by the disrespect, the aggression, and the blatant amplification of institutional racism. I was also saddened to see smug grins on some students' faces and the confident side-glancing smirks they

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gave each other that seemed to affirm for them that they owned complete control of the classroom space—and me. Nothing quite like that had happened before. I felt a bit numb. And I realized that that was part of the point. As my classroom coalesced into a neoliberal, anti-democratic, anti-black, anti-woman arena for white supremist affirmation, I looked out a scarred dingy grey window that seemed to melt into an even drearier lifeless sky. I didn't know what to do. What to say? My mind momentarily drifted back and away. Moments of the past are always present (Pinar, 1975a).

I recalled that when I was about four or five years old my parents took us on a train trip up north. It was one of the very few holidays I would take with my family. My parents dressed me in better than my Sunday best. I remember how people looked at me and said, "What a pretty little lady." My mother made sure I sat up straight, that my crinoline and hoop didn't pop-up and show my underwear. My legs were crossed at my ankles; the lace trim of my socks rippled around them. The trip was like a dream. I had both my parents and two younger brothers, all of us together. It was rare to have both my mother's and my father's attention at the same time. My parents talked, laughed, and told family stories. As early evening came up, the train slowly pulled to a stop. People stretched, stood, and moved toward the doors. My parents talked about what they would do. My mother took hold of my brothers, one still a lap baby, the other two years old. My father took me to stretch my legs, get water, and use the bathroom. As we approached, my father was told that the facilities were for whites only, and: "No colored restroom at this stop." I really had to pee. My father asked if his little girl could use the restroom. He said, "She won't do any harm." He was yelled and cursed at by three white men. They told him I could pee along the tracks like all the other niggers. I was scared. I wanted to cry. My father led me to the far side of the train, away from the station, down a weedy gravel incline. He told me I could pee there. I said, "No." I begged, pleaded, and whined that I wanted to go to the bathroom. My father's face looked sad. He said there wasn't a bathroom. All the while he moved and shifted his body, trying to put himself between me and others who looked on. I didn't want him to hold my skirt and crinoline. I didn't want him to hold my hand. I had no recollection of having ever peed in front of my father, or my mother. People looking at me, my father holding the crinolated skirts of my dress, I peed, I cried. I peed on my socks, my shoes, my panties. I had not been taught how to pee in a ditch in front of an audience. The trauma must have been complete. I don't, and have never been able to, remember the remainder of that train trip. What kind of people force a four-year old to pee in a ditch?

My mother had been annoyed that my father hadn't known about what was available and what wasn't at that train stop. After all, wasn't he a black man who'd lived in the south for most of his life? Why didn't he know what places would be good for us and what places bad? As for my father, he had plaintively wondered aloud why the train would have made such a stop. There had been another stop that would have been more hospitable; it was bypassed. Had we taken the wrong train? Had the train schedule changed once we were boarded? We lived in a world where spaces were often deemed "white by default, unless otherwise designated" (Guffey, 2012, p. 50). Every action my parents took required careful decision making and planning. Colored and white signs and rules were a life-or-death issue (Sandoval-Strausz, 2005). Preparation for a long train trip would have been strategic and well-planned, especially when that trip included children. Such a trip was a gauntlet. The history of whiteness in America is filled with containment, restriction of blackness and black bodies. My mother and father were experienced wayfinders and wayfarers. My earliest lesson, perhaps my first, in racialized

space and the shredding of the black family had been complete. White supremacy calls into question every action African Americans take. The only aspect of even the simplest of plans that can be counted on with certainty is that white normativity will undermine even the most cautious and thoughtful maps and alternative routes along one's journey.

Progressive – Listening, Thinking, Speaking Living From Where I Am Into Possible Futures

There I was, a black person, caged in the crinoline and hoops of white supremacy. Exiled and unwelcome in my own classroom, neither with nor without authority. Once settled, students looked at the administrator, looked at me. I began a lecture/discussion. I asked questions. I offered information. I asked students to engage in an application activity I'd prepared. Some students refused to participate. Some were told by others not to participate. Some were responsive. At one point, I had the feeling that I was disappointing some of them. I had continued to teach, continued to patiently attempt to get students to engage. I had not given up in exasperation. And it seemed that, perhaps most disappointing of all, I had not simply stopped teaching, I had not ended the class. I had not packed up my materials and abruptly left the room. Instead, I had moved further onward into attempts to teach my students.

Even under attack I acknowledged to myself the historical cultural tug to shield and protect my students from their own racism. This is a familiar, expected, and sometimes demanded, African American woman "mammy" response (Wilson, 2012), wherein African American women are to defer to their white abusers. To do that meant that I would have to assume that my students do not know what they are doing and, further, that I was conscious of and fearful of the threat—that to challenge them would cause me more harm and solidify their belief that I am inferior and that they are superior. I wanted to, wished to help them reach a level of rationality that could permit them to think, rethink, perhaps to feel, that what they were doing was wrong. The other trap—to mollify, to assuage—would also verify, amplify, white supremacy. Which should I step into? Neither would help them, me, the administrator, or the university. Both would reverberate out into and touch and shape the learning experiences and lives of their future students.

Toward the end of our class, I asked students whether they had any questions. After a long pause, one student said she had a question, but it wasn't about the content of the class we were finishing. She looked to a student next to her to gather support for the attack she was about to launch. With that, she and a couple other students began an orchestrated barrage of assault questions. I had previously addressed all their questions, numerous times, in one-on-one meetings, in small groups, during whole class sessions. I responded calmly, patiently. But I showed my discomfort and disapproval of the way they wanted to conduct our class. I questioned their accusatory and aggressive manner. When they were wrong, I told them so and pointed out why, which some students, even those who claimed to be the most aggrieved, acknowledged, accepted, and agreed with. My students and the administrator had staged, rehearsed, and performed an imaginary situation. Their enactment, their performance, revealed the real situation—normative whiteness. They had expected me to play the role of black, inferior, fearful, incompetent. They did not take the opportunity to move beyond the imaginary situation they'd concocted to consider the real situation, their position in it, and, thereby, change their thinking, feeling, behavior. The moment seen correctly and accepted.

Descriptive Analysis – Racism Continues to Astonish Me

Initially, I wanted to break through; but as we progressed, I also began to wonder whether I should (DeCuir-Gunby & Gunby, 2016). I am grateful to titans like DuBois, who changed his mind a lot as he organized against, researched, taught, and wrote about the ills of anti-black racism in America. DuBois thought that anti-black racism could be put down by identifying the talented tenth and having them teach others. DuBois's agenda for countering white supremacy was admirable but mistaken. The problem or challenge isn't to show white supremacists that blacks are intelligent, are human beings, it's to convince blacks to take hold of and assert their humanity, their personness. So, asserting my learnedness, my authority, and expertise to my students would be of little use. Some already knew that. I know this. They wished for me not to believe it. They wished to convince others not to believe it. They were asserting their whiteness. Their belief in normative whiteness says that they must be right. No matter what they say or do, they must be right because they are white. Any person acting in the sphere of normative whiteness can of course question my authoritative knowledge, even when they have none themselves. This lie is the hallmark of the everyday life experience of living black in America. My students seemed intent on turning their class, our class, my class, into a kind of tortured, mutilated theatre that liberates no one. Did they enjoy participating in their own anti-black humiliation? I found myself alone in a theater of the absurd. No one else seemed to face the harsh, jarring fact of what we were doing. No one else seemed prepared to be fully and completely present in what they, we, had created. I asked myself whether I had the strength. I knew I had the responsibility. I knew I could marshal the grace required to move my students to a level of understanding, dignity, and respect for themselves, for where they were, for how they'd come to that moment in time, for what we were there to do together, for the students they could, might, teach, learn, and live with in the future. Why what they were doing was hurtful, painful for them, and for me. But as I spoke aloud, I also looked across the tracks at an opposite train of thought. I had to push back the desire to not have responsibility. To give into the ease of comforting them would have been to act in bad faith. The forces of racism have moved toward the same dead-end stop all my life, and I simply could not go along for another ride. Students had as much as told me that my teaching had no meaning or value for them, to them. Normative whiteness is irrational. There is no logical way to combat that kind of behavior.

I don't know whether university policy and practice explicitly called for an administrator to come to my classroom and make an observation in front of that specific group of students or to contact and question students in my other classes. But I do know that it perpetuated and reinforced white normativity and racial injustice. Blindly adhering to policies and practices exacerbates racist and oppressive practices (Ray, 2019).

Bracketing Analysis – Blackness in the White Gaze

I was conscious of being looked at. My sense was that the violent enactment of the gaze of white supremacy was not an unconscious act. Some students and the administrator appeared to exercise the white supremacist aesthetic as a power that they have always known to be theirs and to do so because they could. I resisted their attempt to "fix" me with their white gaze. bell hooks says that there is "power in looking" (hooks, 1992, p. 150). I looked back at them. I wanted to give them time to abandon their attack, to come to their senses. I offered them space to turn toward healing, toward understanding. I sought to bring their attention to their white gaze, to help them see and

understand the white gaze as an aesthetic white supremist act. The white gaze asserts that, as an African American woman, I am not allowed to attempt to teach whites what is good, what is beautiful, what is aesthetic, what is worthwhile in visual arts teaching and learning in P-12 schools. I walked toward my students' anger, aggression, fear, and hate. Initially, I wanted to break through, but I admit, I also wavered, wondered whether I should. *Currere* opens a space for me to ask myself, "How does it feel not to obscure the truth of the racism I experience?" I have no choice but to live the blackness whites cast upon me, sometimes more than others.

Existentially, white supremacists' notions of blackness are not a choice I make (Ngo, 2017). They had already existed when I was born. I started my life by living in this abject, objective blackness created by anti-black racism. I work to create how I will live subjectively in historical, cultural, social, economic, aesthetic, educational, medical, political, anti-black spaces. Anti-black racism situates my life experiences, saturates the contexts in which I make my life choices. That I am an African American woman is fixed. My black consciousness is not; it is created. I am not, cannot, and will not be who white supremacists wish me to be. There is no aspect of American life in which my identity as an African American woman does not become part of the terrain. The materiality of race locates me as a black woman professor in a position to account for my lived experience within the very places where I teach, live, and engage in scholarship. There is no place and no thing that I can do to avoid being situated within my work, even when I am not the subject. The *currere* method invites me to place myself in the work, in the context of the scholarship, to arrive at new and broader understandings of my practices as a teacher and a scholar. I want to draw attention to how black female presence is embodied—as teacher, artist, scholar—how it is accounted for within university teaching (McCoy-Wilson, 2020) and treated with disregard, disrespect, contempt, hostility, and aggression. *Currere* is a method that supports consideration of how my academic work informs my life (Pinar, 2004), how my life experiences shape my teaching and scholarship, and how both are enveloped in culture, society, economics, aesthetics, politics, and history. My hope is to discover lessons to be learned from interacting with a narrative generated from my teaching experiences and glean insights into how my reflective practice may advance my work in the preparation of future teachers.

Synthesis – "Tired of Talking about Racism"

While we had not discussed racism in my class, a couple of my students said that they were "tired of talking about racism." Others nodded in agreement. They may have been discussing racism in some of their other university courses but not in mine. And yet, it was in my class that they decided to voice their displeasure at having to learn about and discuss racism. They vocalized their anger at the topic. Their feelings of being put upon. My students behaved as though they had to defend themselves against me. My students were telling me I needed their consent to talk about racial injustices in teaching and learning, lest I hurt their feelings by discussing something, asking them to consider something, that could be painful for them (Evans-Winters & Hines, 2020). Deference to normative whiteness is endemic in all areas of American life, including education. So, I had asked them, "What other social, cultural, economic, or political challenges facing P-12 students, parents, communities, and schools would you like to discuss?"

Sartre (1992) argues that strictly enacting institutionalized principles, ideals, practices is an evasion of responsibility to freedom. By continuing to teach, by continuing to focus on planned content, by asking students to participate in learning

disciplinary content, by not explicitly directing their/our attention to my students' normative white behavior, was I enacting a kind of "race neutrality"? Was I exacerbating oppression and domination? My writing, my speaking about the oppressiveness of racism in the university and its' classrooms is necessary (Hollis, 2017). My freedom, self-development, my self-determination require that I recognize and enact my freedom for myself and for others, including those who seek to oppress my freedom. *Currere* is acting in good faith—an embrace of freedom of self.

There is no subject matter or praxis that can be understood without consideration of race. My experiences in the 21st century university classroom highlight the history of anti-black racism in America and create a challenge to learning and engagement for students, administrators, and university staff who have not had to consider that history. While disconcerting and disturbing in many ways, what I experienced with my students, the administrator, the university, was instructive. Placing anti-black racism, at the center of my students' development of understanding and production of knowledge is necessary, is essential. Students will feel uncomfortable, they will feel intimidated, and, yes, some will be outright angry and speak and act in their anger. Asserting my agency as an African American woman professor and the ways in which my agency is treated in the very real context of white supremacy, including normative whiteness in higher education and visual art, and my efforts to resist undermining of my agency may help to make whiteness visible. My students, the administrator, and university were able to perform whiteness without having to verbally or otherwise say that that was what they were doing (Davis, 2019). Surely some of the goals of higher education and teacher preparation are to see whiteness, advance toward thinking beyond whiteness, and develop future teachers' capacities to resist learning and teaching through the lenses of whiteness.

University students who are planning to become teachers have as much freedom as most and more than many others. They have the freedom to choose whether they will accept institutional and systemic anti-black racism as fixed and unchangeable and, thus, continue to replicate white supremacy. They can choose not to choose and by such inaction maintain their status, their weak position in racial domination and oppression of other human beings. Or they can accept the full responsibility of being a human being, of having the responsibility to produce meaning and to see all human beings as human beings.

One of the goals of teacher education ought to be to dismantle the social ontology of whiteness. Like everyone else, future teachers are born into social environments, institutional structures, histories, cultures, that have shaped them and the world around them. And, like everyone else, they are responsible for their collective and individual actions. But I think their responsibility extends further. They are also responsible for examining and moving beyond the whiteness that pervades social and educational life so that they ably teach their students anti-racist behaviors and thinking. They have a duty to resist and to dismantle whiteness. All people do—but especially teachers.

We need teachers who can teach African American and white students to go beyond the limitations of negative historical portrayals and contemporary institutionalized discrimination of African Americans. The notion that they could transcend their preconceived beliefs about African Americans in general and female African American professors in particular, is a very high hurdle for some white university teacher education students to reach. They would first have to accept that they live, think, and act within, and have been shaped by, anti-black systems of racism. Yancy (2013) says that "whiteness in

its everyday performance within a white racist interstitial space, [is] a space where Black bodies negotiate ways of avoiding white racist micro-practices that are underwritten by whiteness as the transcendental norm" (p. 100). Teacher education students would have to accept that the system of white dominance that made them who they are also limited who African Americans could become—limited the actual being and becoming of all African Americans. That is a good destination. But a hard road to travel.

Perhaps a good first step, a step that will have to be repeated again and again, an enduring step, is to value the struggles of African Americans, to acknowledge and study the hundreds of years African Americans have struggled for good education, good life, and freedom in America. From preschool and elementary school (Kerner Commission Report, 1968) through colleges and universities (Harris, 2021), from pre- and post-slavery to Black Lives Matter, the education of African Americans continues to be thwarted. What other lessons do I want to take forward? Second, African American blackness must be explicit and situated in the development of teacher education students' knowledge, understanding, and knowledge production. This may make many students uncomfortable. Third, when I assume agency as an African American woman professor, when I reject and resist white supremacy, I change university teaching processes, methods, and pedagogical practices that perpetuate white domination. Moreover, I challenge students to think outside of white supremacy and support their efforts to do so. Fourth, visual art, teaching, and learning cannot be understood, nor can they be practiced, without my students understanding and deconstructing anti-black racism. Anti-black racism is incised into every aspect of American life. There is no refuge. It will take honest, genuine, collective, concerted, and persistent work to change that. Fifth, students who have never questioned white supremacy, may find it difficult to do so. They may become angry, resentful. They may feel guilt or shame, and these may be magnified in the classrooms of an African American woman professor. Challenging white supremacy may cause some students to verbally withdraw, as they may not have words for how they can begin to understand and deconstruct whiteness nor words for how they can begin to understand, construct, and affirm blackness as part of humanness.

The autobiographical aspect of *currere* allowed me to combine African American tradition and teacher preparation (Pinar, 2004). *Currere* methodology provided a space to consider the centrality of racial positionality in education (Villaverde & Pinar, 1999). I accept the facticity of being an African American woman in a white dominant university. But obviously that isn't enough. I question how the facticity of my blackness, and, therefore, my inherited powerlessness in the face of institutionalized whiteness and students' individual and collective historical, social, and cultural whiteness, could go beyond merely providing anticipated assault/entertainment and reaffirmation of the status quo. How can the facticity of my blackness and my gender and my attempt to draw students' attention to their enactment of white supremacy, lead students to question their whiteness? *Currere* offers me a way to acknowledge and understand my failure and see ways and take steps toward repairing the educational and societal destruction of racism. Through *currere,* I can attempt to image a way of healing through respectfully understanding the presence and persistence of white supremacist destruction and infliction of pain and suffering.

My *currere* is testament to the realities that institutional statements, policies, and limited practices of diversity, equity, and inclusion are not meant to and cannot substitute for positionalities, learning, policies, and actions that are explicitly anti-black in nature (Aniagolu, 2011; Cabrera, 2017; Corces-Zimmerman et al., 2021). As an African

American, I've lived my whole life in a moment of perpetual urgency. It makes life very short. Heightened tension, expectation of attack, continuous daily aggression. In the anguish of adversity, we sometimes find that reverberations of the shock-moment ripple out and back into the past. Our personal past. And our collective past. Such calls to the past amplify and define the present. They signal a deep desire to make sense of the present in what is past. I am learning to pay attention to that holler, that call. I inhabit it for a while. I examine it, I interrogate, integrate it. I consider its significance for me and for the teacher preparation work I am doing with others in the present. I consider what I might learn from it to take into the future. Rather than being called to a crippling sadness about the state of the human condition; rather than spiraling into anguish over the persistent infliction of suffering upon African Americans, *currere* urges me on along a track toward thinking about how teacher preparation might be done better, how teacher education could lead to a new, equitable kind of human existence—a human existence beyond white supremacy.

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