Ficto-Currere, Post-Truth, and Subversive Uncertainty

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What if it Isn't True?

I teach a first semester course to Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) students called "Interdisciplinary Foundations of Education." In that course, I often draw on my own experience as a former K-12 teacher to tell stories and create case studies that generate thoughtful conversation among the students. These case studies and stories point to various topics covered in the course, such as the history of education both broadly and within our specific shared geographical context—the small, mostly rural province of Nova Scotia, Canada (see Corbett, 2014)—or to the complex moral decisions teachers must make daily. We also explore the sociological complexities of teaching, and I often draw on my experience in Indigenous education to paint pictures for the students of what solidarity through pedagogy can look and feel like.

Students often comment positively on the course, citing the stories and case studies as a high point in the first semester of their B.Ed. program. Indeed, in what is often perceived by pre-service teachers as the overly theoretical landscape of the university, students appreciate the attention to real-life experience I offer in my course. From my perspective as an instructor, I am, of course, simply happy that they remain interested long enough for us to have conversations about the things I consider foundational to education. For the sake of elucidating the sort of story I am describing, I elaborate one example below.

As a new elementary teacher in a rural community, I found myself rather lonely. I began using a dating website to see if there were any folks in the area with whom I might be able to develop a social relationship. Somewhat dismayed by the options, I eventually connected with a person around my age (24 or 25 at the time) with whom I shared several interests. After chatting for a week or so, they invited me to their home. Walking up to the house, I noticed that all the lights were off except for one in the basement. Slightly nervous, I knocked on the door. It was answered by one of my students, a girl in fourth grade. She looked at me a bit shocked and said, "Are you here to see my sister?"

I usually pause the story there to invite some reaction and initial conversation focused on what the pre-service teachers in my class might do in such a situation. This leads into a discussion about how expectations of teachers change depending on the community and how, in my experience, in a rural community, you are *always* a teacher. Whereas in urban teaching situations once you leave the school you can meld back into the general population of a city, in a rural setting your behaviours are observed with much more scrutiny, and informal communication networks make it so that nothing stays hidden for long. For many students, this idea of always being a teacher is a deal breaker—they need their anonymity and their freedom to act in ways some might say are unbecoming of a teacher. Others don't see this as too demanding a requirement and think the benefits of living in a small, vibrant community outweigh the stresses of living in a larger urban center. Eventually, when the conversation slows down, I resume the narration.

After getting over my initial shock, I decided that my need for social connection outweighed my professional concerns about becoming involved with a student's sibling,

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and I replied, "Yes, is your sister in?" The student's eyes lingered on me before she led me downstairs. When I entered the bedroom, I immediately smelled marijuana (which was illegal at the time) and saw pills and powders scattered across a coffee table.

I often pause the story again there to see how many students would run out of the house before sharing the fact that that is exactly what I did. We all have a good laugh over the story, and I let them know that my reputation in the community wasn't damaged by the experience, though I did walk away with a new perspective on my role as a teacher in that small, rural community. It's a great story, and it almost always elicits equal parts laughter, anxiety, and thoughtful consideration. It is also tied to the specific curriculum goals I am expected to teach in the course: the concept of rurality. But what if it isn't true?

In this paper, I want to think about truth, fiction, and uncertainty in teaching and curriculum studies. I want to think of these topics *now*, when the phenomenon of post-truth has become ubiquitous in global politics (Suiter, 2016). In discussing these topics, I engage the concept of *ficto-currere*, "fictional narrative framed within *currere*" (McNulty, 2019, p. 75), as articulated by curriculum scholar Morna McDermott McNulty (2018, 2019). I argue that *ficto-currere*, in juxtaposing fiction not with fact but with finitude, can serve as a sort of affective resistance to the post-truth movement—a subversive dreaming otherwise within a heteropatriarchal techno-capitalist system that seems endless. Part of that subversion, I suggest, is leaning into uncertainty, and that yields insight into the question above: "what if it isn't true?"

Methodologically, this paper is not precisely informed by *currere* in the way many in this journal are. Rather, it is an act of educational theorizing. The concern of this paper, however, is vitally important to *The Currere Exchange* community. *Ficto-currere*, as an iteration on the form of inquiry central to this journal's project, offers new and exciting possibilities for those committed to the place of lived experience in curriculum theorizing. How those possibilities are understood and actualized, however, is not a given, especially amid the rampant misunderstanding and distrust of the academic enterprise prevalent in post-truth populist movements the world over. I maintain that there is a significant distinction between fiction in research and post-truth, and, however obvious it is, it should be kept front of mind as this field-shifting concept of *ficto-currere* is engaged. Moreover, I also maintain that the field should be vigilant about keeping the intent of *ficto-currere*, and perhaps *currere* more broadly, subversive.

I begin this paper by characterizing the current socio-political moment with reference to the idea of post-truth politics. I then move on to discuss the emerging concept *ficto-currere* and situate it within the larger landscape of autobiographical curriculum studies. Next, I discuss the intersections of those ideas before offering a reframing of both concepts in conversation with Brain Massumi's (2015) writing on the politics of affect. Finally, I conclude by returning to the question of whether the possibility of untruth in my opening narrative matters, pedagogically.

Post-Truth Politics

Truth has very high stakes. In his address to the Ukrainian nation on February 22nd, 2022, president Volodymyr Zelensky made that abundantly clear when, in response to Russia's recognition of the Donbas as an independent republic, he said, "We have truth on our side, and we will never keep the truth from you" (Melkozerova, 2022, para. 14). Throughout the war in Ukraine, the battle around truth has been pivotal, and Russian government officials and state-run media organizations have done everything in their

power to control the narrative coming out of Ukraine. On the other side, Ukrainian officials have denounced Russian rhetoric at every opportunity, and Western media outlets have backed them up with independent investigations on more than one occasion. Yet, that narrative clearly remains subject to influences beyond simple facts, and lives hang in the balance.

Such rhetorical interventions on the truth are now commonplace in North America, particularly in the American media landscape. Indeed, it has become so prevalent globally that Oxford Dictionaries listed "post-truth" as its 2016 word of the year. They defined it as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (as quoted in Peters, 2017, p. 563). The election of the 45th president of the United States and the Brexit movement are often cited as prime examples of the phenomenon of post-truth in politics, but there are many others.

Post-truth operates in several ways. Proprietors of post-truth sometimes argue that there are multiple valid interpretations of certain facts. In other instances, the facts themselves can be changed through the seeming validity of multiple perspectives or through the acceptance of an unproven assertion as fact. Others still defend wild and fantastical statements under the guise of critical questioning. As the definition cited above indicates, the commonality in this playbook is that emotional appeal remains more influential than fact or reason. Suiter (2016) points to reality TV, social media, economic deregulation, and globalization as factors contributing to the emergence of post-truth populism. She also notes that "many lacked the educational opportunities needed to thrive in a globalised world and live with less security and lower wages than their parents' generation" (Suiter, 2016, p. 25). This lack of security has at least correlated with a rise in skepticism of government, media, and academia among some populations.

Accompanied by the climate catastrophe, a growing societal awareness of the prevalence of systemic racism, and the COVID-19 pandemic, the movement toward post-truth has become one of the defining markers of the socio-pedagogical atmosphere of third decade of the third millennium. While the past six years have seen a steady stream of educational research seeking to disrupt the pull toward post-truth, more theorizing is needed. This paper attempts to respond to that need by considering *ficto-currere* an intervention on the movement toward post-truth.

Ficto-Currere

Ficto-currere was put forward by McNulty (2018) and brought the possibilities of fiction into conversation with the method of *currere. Currere*, of course, was offered up by William Pinar (1994) in the 1970s as an intervention on a curriculum field that was quickly becoming dominated by empirical research. Pinar's contribution was to centre lived experience in curriculum theorizing, inviting more complexity and nuance into a static, dying field (Schwab, 1969). Since the evocation of *currere* in the 1970s, many scholars have taken it up both as method and as ethos, shifting the curriculum conversation more toward lived experiences. Today, journals like *The Currere Exchange* remain committed to the validity of personal experience in education research and its potential as a source for rich and nuanced curriculum theorizing and curriculum making.

In recent years, several interventions on and additions to the concept of *currere* have emerged. Baszile (2015) has suggested *currere*—specifically *currere* informed by critical race and feminist theory (critical race/feminist *currere*)—as a way of decolonizing one's mind. Paul and Beierling (2017) have sought a *currere* 2.0, or a method of knowing oneself amid the hypermediated landscape of the third millennium. Drawing on various

sub-Saharan African traditions, Le Grange's (2019) notion of *Umbutu-currere* likewise responds to the contexts of the third millennium by centering human connectedness with ecological beings in the *currere* process. Each of these interventions creates new possibilities for scholars, and each also shapes the complicated conversation in curriculum studies and *The Currere Exchange*.

Ficto-currere is another variation on Pinar's original idea, this one drawing on auto-fiction and speculative fiction to create a (re)construction of one's lived experience lodged within a fantastical, fictional, and/or speculative setting. Though a few other texts exist (e.g., Sanders, 2019), the definitive example of *ficto-currere* is the novel *Blood's Will* (McNulty, 2018). The novel follows the story of a mid-career academic and mother as she falls in love with a vampire and wrestles with the existential conflicts of her shifting (un)reality. In addition to the main story, there is an afterward by the author (McNulty, 2018) and a subsequent article (McNulty, 2019) that make connections between the novel and the field of curriculum theory. I take those texts up here toward a further elaboration of McNulty's thinking about *ficto-currere*.

McNulty understands *currere* as a form of memory work and says that *ficto-currere* "defies the binary between memory and fiction—both of which are 'unreal' and constructed" (McNulty, 2019, p. 75). Memory is, indeed, a constructed, filtered version of the truth. Memories can be true, but as per Freud, they can also be false, incomplete, or repressed. Rather than trying to reconstruct true events, *ficto-currere* leans into the unreality of memory, reconstructing a fictionalized version of what happened and speculating on what could be. McNulty continues, "as a form of inquiry, fictionalized narratives or *ficto-currere*, are necessary contributions to the disruptions of normalizing and totalizing oppressive discourses produced within traditional frameworks of inquiry, which have constructed centuries of colonized and dead knowledges" (p. 75). By naming it a form of inquiry, McNulty aligns *ficto-currere* with the body of literature in curriculum studies that works against the dominance of empirical and practice-oriented norms of educational research (i.e., curriculum development; see Nellis, 2009), those same norms to which *currere* responded in the 20th century (Pinar, 1994). She also aligns *ficto-currere* with feminist speculative theorizing (e.g., Haraway, 2016) and draws on Sylvia Wynter's work to suggest a decolonial praxis in such speculation.

The theoretical underpinnings of these alliances are in the shared critique of empirical rationality as the standard for truth in research and society. Twentieth-century feminists critiqued patriarchal science as making false claims to truth by asserting objectivity where none was possible—the construction of knowledge is always subjective (Baszile, 2015; Braidotti, 2022). Decolonial thinkers shared this critique and showed the ways that science had been mobilized toward constructing Indigenous and racialized peoples as less than human, with oppressors using their monopoly over truth to justify colonization (Smith, 2012). These logics follow through to today, with Indigenous feminists remaining critical of the way western science is continually legitimized in areas it ought not to be, such as commercial DNA tests being used to justify careless claims to Indigeneity (Tallbear, 2013). Posthumanist feminists are likewise critical of specific manifestations of science, such as the techno-capitalist colonization of space and cyberspace (Braidotti, 2022).

The point of evoking these decolonial and feminist critiques of science is to suggest that what is deemed "true" has never been neutral. The construction of objective knowledge, and by extension capital "T" Truth, has always been informed by those who hold power within a particular society—in the West: white, European, able-bodied CIS men (Braidotti, 2022). In pointing out this concentration of power, feminist scholars and

activists have effectively started to dismantle it. In my reading, post-truth politicians have felt their monopoly over truth slipping, and in response have sought to undermine the value of truth or at least to take advantage of it being undermined by other forces.

While she doesn't speak directly to post-truth, McNulty seems aware of the critiques raised above. Indeed, she seems bent on skirting, if not directly challenging, the centralization of academic power and privilege in claims to objectivity through her embrace of speculation (*ficto*) and subjectivity (*currere*). In this way, *ficto-currere* may respond to neo-materialist philosopher Rosi Braidotti's (2022) assertion that what is needed now is both critique *and* creativity in scholarship. Indeed, as discussed below, I think *ficto-currere* has an immense subversive potential.

Convergence and Divergence

While both the pull toward speculative fiction as a generative source of theorizing in academia and the pull toward playing fast and loose with the truth in politics work at visioning the possible rather than the actual, the effects and intent couldn't be further apart. The key difference I can see, and the reason I find one appealing and the other appalling, is that the speculative modality offers a vision of reality without denying the existence of truth, however unknowable or subjective it may be. As McNulty (2019) crucially points out, "fiction is not the opposite of fact; it is the opposite of finitude" (p. 75). Fiction is an otherwise to truth, not a replacement for it. Moreover, unlike the proprietors of post-truth, authors of fiction make no claim to truth. There is, thus, a transparency in the whole interaction that makes it palatable. This transparency is crucial to legitimacy. Indeed, transparency about the grounds from which one claims truth has become a routine part of research. In the social sciences, researchers lay out their axiological, epistemological, and ontological assumptions clearly, and in the hard sciences lengthy explanations of methodology are the norm. In either case, there is a clear commitment to saying, "These are the grounds by which I know this to be true."

As above, the movement toward post-truth undermines those practices. It becomes acceptable to disagree with someone not based on a fundamental misalignment of paradigm or based on new or contrary evidence. Rather, it becomes enough to disagree based on hearsay (i.e., many people are saying this) or on misinformation (i.e., vaccines cause autism). Moreover, there is no obligation to truly understand the position with which one disagrees. Emotion takes precedence over fact. A brief return to the opening narrative highlights this difference.

I framed the narrative that began this paper as part of my own lived experience. It was a part of my lived curriculum, and my sharing it under those pretenses made a specific, grounded, and located claim to truth. I know this story to be true because it happened to me. Were it to be revealed to the students later that this was not the case—that the story was a fabrication—they might justifiably be upset by my dishonesty. Were this a case of research in which I had lied in my methodology, the paper might be pulled from publication, the results overturned, critiqued, and discredited. In the classroom setting, however, the consequences are immediate and interpersonal. The students' outrage at being deceived could swiftly turn into a wider distrust of everything I had taught up to that point.

If, however, I framed the story as a case study that happened to another teacher—say, a friend of mine—and it was later revealed that my story was a fabrication, the outrage might be less substantial. Indeed, students often come back from their practice teaching experiences with stories that run counter to the discussions we have around

certain case studies. We talk about those tensions and move beyond them. There is never an overt claim that I am lying.

Fiction then, when understood as such, isn't a deceit; it is an "otherwise" because it doesn't claim to be telling the truth. Those invested in controlling political narratives, however, *are* often making truth claims and/or dealing in the negation of established truths in their own self-interest. While this distinction approaches the obvious, I maintain that knowing the difference is critical, both for scholars undertaking speculative theorizing in the face of post-truth politics and for teachers, who increasingly must deal with the by-products of misinformation in their classrooms.

Subversion

In the climate of post-truth, one cannot help but look for responses. The most obvious response is to fact check those who mislay the truth for personal gain. Several public intellectuals and journalist organizations have taken this approach with varying degrees of success. The merit of such a response cannot be overemphasised, and at times it seems the only one available. However, alternative modalities of resistance and subversion exist.

Writing of practical responses to the political climate of post-truth prevalent in the United States, activist-philosopher Brian Massumi writes, "alternative political action does not have to fight against the idea that power has become affective, but rather has to learn to function itself on the same level" (Massumi, 2015, p. 34). Here, Massumi identifies the previously discussed affective nature of political power, where a feeling spread across a group can illicit more change and more movement than a clear statement of fact. Massumi goes on to say that meeting such affective expressions of power requires an engagement on the same level: "meet affective modulation with affective modulation" (Massumi, 2015, p. 34). The response envisioned by Massumi, then, is not logic in the face of illogical rhetoric and post-truth narrativizing. Rather, he proposes that such plays to collective emotion be met with more of the same. Some intervention needs to be made on the level of affect to disrupt the sway held by post-truth politicians.

Such interventions can take many forms. Critical counter-programing, I think, does some of this work—although within the saturated social media landscape of the twenty-first century, the effects of such interventions only register once the standard of virality is met. For their part, teachers have access to a host of pedagogical tools that can help them respond to affective modulation in kind (e.g., sharing circles, guest speakers, personal stories, literature). Here, I add to that affective modulation toolbox the idea of uncertainty as a form of subversion.

By "subversion" I mean "subtle mechanism(s) of resisting abusive forms of power that create and/or maintain oppression and harm" (Portelli & Eizadirad, 2018, p. 53). Subversion is differentiated from resistance by way of the former's subtle nature. In this sense, subversion refers to small acts, usually from within a particular system, that work against the heteropatriarchal, white, ablest, Eurocentric norms of that system (Portelli & Eizadirad, 2018). By "uncertainty" I refer to the state of having imperfect knowledge of something, but I also evoke the idea of infinitude as taken up by McNulty (2019).

McNulty's (2018) *Blood's Will* (2018) plays with this idea of uncertainty through the unreality of the vampire. She maintains that the vampire is "a form of feminist possibilities countering the totalizing discourse of western episteme" (McNulty, 2019, p. 81) in the novel by way of the vampire's immortality. Not bound within the constraint of human temporality, the vampire is limitless. Such limitlessness is one dimension of

its unreality. This unreality, for McNulty, creates the vampire as "'Other' outside the narrative 'norms' labelled as 'Truth' or human, defined by the racist colonial project that ushered forth our understanding of scientific inquiry" (p. 81). She, thus, positions the vampire as an otherwise to Truth, finitude, and certainty.

There is a parallel here between the figure of the vampire and the use of fiction in inquiry. Both take up a subversive, deviant space through their unreality and their infinitude. By taking a research form (*currere*) that situates itself in the embodied and embedded claims to truth of lived experiences and opening it up to the possibilities of the speculative, McNulty subverts the expectations of the field of autobiographical curriculum studies. Subtly, she invites into the complicated conversation equal parts critique of what is, envisionment of what could be, and healthy scrutiny over what is presented as reality within the field. Though I cannot speak to her intentions, the effect of McNulty's *ficto-currere* is to challenge the finitude of lived experience as a source of curriculum theorizing, venturing into a world in which imagination serves as inspiration for theory.

I maintain that this sort of dreaming of different curricular futures is precisely what is needed in the current socio-pedagogical moment. Emerging from the seemingly endless COVID-19 pandemic, societies need radically new possibilities in the form of responses to the changing viral landscape of the world. Likewise, the ongoing climate crisis requires new ways of thinking because the old ones have yielded fundamentally exploitative relationships with the natural world. And, perhaps most relevant to the discussion here, where political power is increasingly controlled by those who effectively modulate affect, new modalities of response in the same register are needed.

Speculative theorizing, and *ficto-currere* specifically, can be precisely that—a response to affective modulation that itself centers affect. By refusing the claims to objective Truth of patriarchal techno-capitalist science and refusing to engage with post-truth populists in a war of facts that seem not to matter, *ficto-currere* opens up the possibility of becoming otherwise. The one addition I would make is this: *ficto-currere* must stay subversive in its intent. Too many methods, ideas, and philosophies that were originally subversive have been swallowed up by the same systems they once fought against (e.g., the commodification of punk culture). Curriculum studies is not immune from this critique, as suggested by Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernández (2013) in their discussion of the replacement of non-white voices with white ones in the field. Indeed, Pinar (2023) acknowledges this threat to *currere* broadly: "Nothing inherently limiting about progressivism or about conservatism I say, but both can be misappropriated, in our era the former by corporations, the latter by fascists. *Currere* could be too" (p. xi). *Ficto-currere*, then, as an emerging method of inquiry within the field of curriculum studies, must maintain and expand its anti-colonial roots, seeking to envision not just new expressions of self, but new ways of being in the world—exits from systemic racism, heteropatriarchy, settler colonialism, capitalism, and, in education, the mind-numbing bureaucracy of the everyday.

An Uncertain Conclusion

One way of keeping *ficto-currere* and education subversive is in the embrace of uncertainty. In my experience, students come to our B.Ed. program seeking answers and practical advice about what to do in the classroom. Despite the best efforts of their instructors, they often see their time at the university in very instrumental terms—as training for the specific tasks they will undertake as teachers (Sanders, 2019). The courses I teach in the foundations of education diametrically oppose this vision of

teacher education. The field of educational foundations seeks a broader engagement with philosophy, sociology, and history in the interest of building a depth of knowledge about education. As an instructor in that field, I view my role as helping students make sense of the disagreements they might encounter in education, helping them learn to be reflective about their practice and helping them comprehend, and develop a respect for, the complexity of teaching.

In this, students and I have desires that are somewhat at odds. I think of it in this way: students are looking for certainty; I am trying to help them accept the uncertainty they will encounter in the classroom. Others have noted the role certainty plays in the affective landscape of teacher education (Britzman, 2007); my addition here is to propose uncertainty as subversive and productive in the teacher education classroom, just as it is in *ficto-currere*.

To return to the beginning: Does it matter if my opening narrative is true? Yes. If I make a claim that something is true based on my lived experience and it is later found to be untrue, the value of the pedagogical intervention is depleted. If, however, I purposefully and clearly articulate this event as a possible reality without a claim to truth, but also without denying the existence of truth, I invite something else, something that adds a further pedagogical layer to the story: reflexive thinking. Is the story true, is it false—you decide. You can also decide whether the lesson shared in that story is true of your experience. That sort of critical, reflexive interpretation is precisely the work of teachers, the work that has been systematically undervalued and eroded through the insidious influence of neoliberalism on education, which attempts to turn teachers into technicians rather than intellectuals (Giroux, 1988).

My call here, then, is to lean toward uncertainty in teacher education, for in uncertainty we find something subversive to those who claim to know and those who say no one knows. *Ficto-currere*, I propose, can be a way of embracing that uncertainty within inquiry and, by extrapolation, within our classrooms, so long as we maintain its subversive intent.

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