Rural Rivers Deep in my Veins: *Currere* as Care

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100 years from now, don't look back and think me quaint,
Don't judge and call me sinner, don't judge and call me saint.
We lived beneath the arch with a mix of grit and grace,
Just ordinary folk in an extraordinary place.
(Daley, 2007, p. 67)

Rural knowledges and rural education live far beyond what happens in rural schools. Some of the most useful knowledge I have exists from a history of improvising, making, building, gardening, tending; my past, present and future is situated in an animated worldview (Fidyk, 2013; 2017), relational to land, community, non-human animals, and cosmic energies. Corbett (2013) remarks,

> We might understand the rural as a space of intersections and tensions, of people and place, of people and people, of place and space, and so forth. Rurality, as I understand it, is about connections and stewardship. Rural matters because we make it matter, sometimes as a discursive spatial rubbish bin for the evasion of complexity. (p. 2)

A substantial amount of rural educational research problematizes rural communities, with the pretense that there is something wrong with rural as compared to urban (Howley & Howley, 2014). To be clear, I am inspired by much that exists in rural educational research (Donehower et al., 2007; Rautio & Lanas, 2013; Shaft & Jackson, 2010; White & Corbett, 2013). In a vein of respect for rural, I pursue its inherent complexity. In this piece, I utilize *currere* as an expression of care in order to engage an ethic of care (Noddings, 2013) in research, as researcher.

Why have I chosen this research? Why has it chosen me? How is it layered into my "self and its evolution and education" (Pinar, 1975, p. 19)? Why and how do I *care*? To explore myself as researcher, I go through Pinar's (1975) process of *currere*; I explore the regressive, progressive, analytical and synthetical and do so according to his practice outlined in "The Method of *Currere*." I am looking for a "point of coherence" connecting my "biography as it is lived," taking "myself, and my existential experience as a data source" (p. 20). I am not just looking at myself as researcher, I am looking for my *relations* in the research. My research is situated in the community wherein I grew up, so of course *I* am located there. But, how am I located there and why does it matter? "To ascertain where one is, when one is, one must locate the past" (Pinar, 1975, p. 22); I engage in *currere* to immerse into the past, present, future and their analytical and synthetical interplay. *Currere* in this case is central to locating myself, so that I can be freed to recognize myself and, thus, recognize the import of other relations in my research.

An ethic of care "reflects a cumulative knowledge of human relationships," and "it evolves around a central insight, that self and other are interdependent" (Gilligan, 2013, p. 696). Among other things, *currere* attends to the cumulative, relational, and interdependent. *Currere* can be an expression that imports an ethic of care (Noddings,

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2013) byway of illuminating our relations of care. To do *currere* with care in mind looks at differences between *I want to care* and *I ought to care*, the latter being ethical caring (Noddings, 2013). I see *currere* as a method to explore *caring* as a researcher. Through *currere* I visit myself as researcher and as one caring deeply about rural educational research.

Regressive

> "One returns to the past, to capture it as it was, and as it hovers over the present" (Pinar, 1975, p. 21).

Six Years Old

I'm walking across the yard and then our dirt gravel driveway towards the old Dawson Creek airport building in the middle of the yard. I don't know why we have an "airport" in our yard, but it is where we keep things. Seed bags in piles, stacked. Salt blocks for the cows. Sometimes salt blocks are blue, but today they are browny-red. I lick a salt block as I crawl over them to get into the farm storage. I make my way through all the piles of things stored here. There's red clover seed spilled on the floor. I drop down to a squat and run my finger through the tiny beads. I take a few and put them between my four front teeth. I pop the seeds with my teeth. A taste only connected with stored seeds pops into my mouth—dried-out floral, the story of the flower that made it. I'm here to clean my sister's tack room. There's a mess of horse tack inside. The seed bags in the room *are* the saddle horses. The saddles and blankets are on the floor. I push the stacks into place, place a blanket on top and its saddle. The saddle is so heavy that once I drag it onto the blanket, the pile has shifted and so has the blanket. I'm small but tough. I push (and pull) each piece until I have a straight stack. I repeat for the other two saddles. I pick up the bridles and place them on the saddle horns. Now, to the tack box. And, entirely empty it out—brushes, neatsfoot oil, saddle soap, horse wrap, bug spray, extra bridles, bits, and leather, a leather hole punch. I sort through all of the things and organize them into categories of horse care. I arrange them into the box. I sweep the room and then sit on a saddle and imagine I am out riding. Kassia will be happy to have the tack room cleaned. She likes things clean but does not like to clean them. I like to clean. Maybe we will go for a ride sometime later this week.

Ten Years Old

The red ford with bale forks is in a field two fields East of our house. **N**ever. **E**at. **S**hredded. **W**heat. I always face South and repeat those words so I know where to go when Michael says we are headed to the rock wall North East of the house (or in any other possible direction for any other thing. Go clean the seed drills, North of the corrals.) My dad drives me to the truck. East of the house.

"Do you think you can drive it home?" I have never driven the truck without my dad. I know I have to clutch at the right time to shift gears. He always clutches and I shift. I have been driving beside him or on his lap for as long as I can remember. I know I can get the truck home. I want him to know that I know how to drive.

"Yes!" He leaves me with the truck. He does not start it for me. He just trusts. Maybe he thinks I can walk the less than kilometer home if I can't do it. I will not let this happen. I get in the truck. I turn the key. Nothing happens. Dad does something when I turn the key. The clutch! I have to nearly stand on the peddle to get the truck to start. Success. I let off the clutch. The truck lurches and stalls. No matter. I know how to

start it now. I start it again, slowly let of the clutch as I give a little gas. I lump the truck forward in first. I know there has to be a way to go a faster, in a less lurchy way. I stand on the clutch and move from first to second. I stall again. I am better at shifting when my dad clutches. I repeat the cycle and lose count of how many times I stall. I hope my dad doesn't come get me. I want to get the truck home myself. I also hope he *does* come get me. I don't know anymore if I can drive without him. I don't know anymore if I can get the truck home. I resolve to keep trying until he comes to get me. Again, I start the truck and move into first—release the clutch, give a little gas, go forward, the engine gets louder. It's time to shift again. I clutch and then shift and then release. I give a bit of gas. The engine revs and then quiets, but does not stall. I don't have much further to go. I'm standing at the wheel with my butt just on the edge of the seat. I slowly make my way across the field to our driveway. Constantly scanning the road ahead—the one I have to cross. No one is coming. I get to the road and stop. When I give the gas. I stall again. I start up again and get across the road and slowly drive the truck into the yard. I'm smiling a mile when I see my dad. He returns the mile wide smile. He waits for me to stop and park the vehicle. I get out. It took a long time to get home. I am not as good at driving without my dad, but I *can* do it. He says nothing about it. Just helps me out of the truck and we're on to other chores.

Fifteen Years Old

This year is fragmented. There is no coherence. My sister and dad both died in separate accidents twenty-three days apart. My older brother, Michael and I worry that my mom will sell the place. I take my younger cousin on horse rides. I take my older cousin on quad rides. We tell our mom that we know how dad mixes seed and how much to feed cows. We tell her we know how to pull calves and how to do all of the chores. We tell her we can do this. My brother is eighteen. Michael goes to college and is home to help on the weekends. Neighbors help with fixing fences, haying, and feeding. Everyone remembers this year differently and everyone thinks that they did *all*, all of it themselves. Except my little brother. Matthew remembers nothing. I remember a lot. Times when I was alone. Times when people came to help me out of a bind. Times when I lay on my side in my room with a shattered heart in my chest, leaking half fluid remnants into a paralyzed arm. My family allows me to gently remind them their memories are inaccurate and so are mine. This allowance is granted to no-one else. I remember accidentally killing a newborn calf, when my brother was in school. I remember him dropping out. I remember everything simultaneously falling apart and being held together. I remember eating frozen entrées from Costco instead of home cooked meals. I still hate chicken cordon bleu.

Sixteen Years Old

I have the 89' Chevy truck and can drive to school, home, to different farm locations, and the occasional trip to town. I am responsible for a lot. School, cows, haying, seeding, calving, feeding, etc. My older brother, and I, and a farm hand Greg do almost everything. My mom does the books and has gone back to teaching. My little brother helps along the way. I have breaks in my schedule at school. I often go home to work or get cows back into a fence if a neighbor calls the school to tell me they are out. Most of my friends hang out in the student lounge in between classes. I do sometimes. My high school friends talk about things that happen in the lounge or parties I never go to. Just like when I never mentioned I was cutting greenfeed for sixteen hours on the day

of the community fair, I never mention that I wasn't there at those parties and events. I don't tell anyone how much work my brother Michael and I do. I don't tell them that I break and fix equipment. I don't tell them about the hours of fencing. I don't tell them that I take my horse out every other day during the summer months to check cows, fix fence and ride with my dog. I don't tell them that I work day and night on the farm. I don't tell them that my brother drinks too much. They know some of it, but more often than not, when I do hang out in the lounge, everyone talks about school assignments, weekend parties, volleyball, and hockey. That is what I talk about too. Except when I get up to leave and someone asks me where I am going—I say I have to feed cows.

Eighteen Years Old.

I'm at college. I could have gotten into a city uni, but I did not apply. I knew if I did, I might go, and I can't be far from home. I party away the first semester. I never miss a class or assignment, but I am doing terribly. I party during the week with my friends. There are different ladies' nights all over town. Snapper's is on Wednesday, Pour-house is on Tuesday, and The Corral is on Thursday. Booze is incredibly cheap on these nights; between $0.25 and $1.25 for highballs depending on the night and where you go. I try to get my homework done in a hungover haze during the week, because I have to go home to work on the farm on weekends. I pass all my courses and manage to keep all of my scholarships. I resolve to be a better student in the second semester; I get mostly B's and A's second semester and feel like I'm back on track. I don't tell anyone how I nearly failed calculus.

Twenty-three Years Old

Since starting college, I have stayed at home and worked on the farm in the summers. I have a summer job in the oilfield, painting. It's to pay for school. I garden every evening I possibly can. This summer is killing me. I got demoted because a guy younger than me asked for more responsibility. My boss told me this guy would be in charge, and I would train him and be in charge of him getting all of my old jobs done.

The guy younger than me tells me it isn't a real job. "Oilfield's easy money." He talks about my tits all day. He doesn't listen to me, and he does not do all of the jobs I used to do. I don't do them either. Every Friday my boss calls me in to his office and tells me off for not training this guy properly. I go home every day and do the millions of chores on the farm I have done for forever. I cannot hack this. My cousin offers me a job surveying in Fort Saskatchewan. It pays more than my current job. I quit my job that I've had for four summers. My boss tells me I am screwing him over. My old boss (his boss) tells me he is sorry this happened, and he understands why I am leaving. This is the last summer I spend on the farm full time. When I leave, my mother and I fight. I tell her I am leaving because I cannot handle all of the pressure anymore. She tells me that at least I get to leave some of the time and that I am selfish. We don't talk again until my little brother graduates. I do not live at home for many years to come. I finish my undergrad degree at the UofA.

Twenty-six Years Old

I do my masters in philosophy at Queen's. I am more out of place here than I have ever been in university. All of my farm skills do not matter. All of my thinking skills are inadequate.

Twenty-eight Years Old

I have just graduated, and I decide I'll teach in a rural college or uni without a PhD. I want to be in a rural space because I want to support students who were like me. I don't want to do a PhD because I think I can't hack it. I apply all over western Canada. I get a sessional position at Augustana Campus. What I learn there over the next seven years is tied to rural and not tied to rural. I love my students. I do not love the institution. I drive to campus two to five times a week. The fields and spaces crack open my chest with each drive. I watch the seasons change as one can only witness them in wide open rural Albertan spaces. I return home to my family farm more often again. I dream of moving home, but I don't know how it is possible. I settle for imagining I live East of Edmonton in the countryside.

Progressive

> "We look … at what is not yet the case, what is not yet present" (Pinar, 1975, p. 24).

One Year from Now

I've been working on this cabin in my mind for years and in reality for one. Gifted to me by Opa, the land overlooks the Peace Country. The fields beside me on this slight hill all gradually slope down towards the North. My porch faces North. It's not finished. Painstakingly long project. Stubbornness is built into every crevice and every length of scavenged wood: power poles dug deep into the earth, connected with the largest and longest boards I can afford, sided with rough cut wood slats. I look over the land that fills my soul and expands it. This farmland is home for me, but will it be for Maxine? Will Eddie grow to love this space? He seems reticent. It is laced with the arsenic of a family who has lost too much, and they have deep hurts. In turn, they hurt us—never intentional. I consider whether it is possible to move home, yet again. This dream of mine, to help move our family farm forward. Sure, I have always come home, delved into farm life the instant my car turns down my mother's drive. Now I am moving back, after so many years of not being able to come back for more than two weeks at a time. I am here to be a part of the landscape that built me. I am here to give my daughter the gifts of knowing that only come in close commune with a tight knit social community, a rough but ready relationship with the land, and a heartbreaking and heart-making relationship with animals. I am here so she knows the river—*the mighty peace*. I am here so she knows the hills—*the saddle hills*. I am here so she knows I did not run away, that I care and that this place lives in my bones. I am here as much for me as I am for her. I am here for Eddie too. His distant rural roots gifted him slow bones—he thinks and lives most exquisitely outside of city life. He has a longing for the rural, but maybe not this place … maybe not my rural. I do not know. For now, I continue to build a space for me, so that I can come back. My brothers say it's good to have a place for yourself.

Two Years from Now

I'm working on my research with community members. The creative process is driven by the things they need to get done, to build, to work with, to maintain. Improvisation and creativity live in the hands of my co-researchers. Today, we are fixing a set of rakes for haying. The tire has blown and tines need replacing. It should not be too difficult of a fix, but ya never know. I arrive at the field and get started, coffee in hand. I take a look at where the tines are missing and how many to replace. I think about

whether we will replace all of them or just some. The tined wheels on the rake still pick up hay relatively well, and you do not need to replace all of the broken ones. It's just good to have a larger ratio of unbroken tines to broken ones. By the looks of it, the tire has had many holes. Maybe not so simple a fix. The heavy paint from the distributer coats the tire parts. My neighbor arrives, and we chat. He talks about how he does not want to replace all the tines.

"You could go through a lot, like that." We aim to take the tire off first so it can go to the repair shop. Fix the tines while we wait. It's a good day to dry hay, warm and windy. Too bad the tire blew. Pull the bolts. Jack up the rakes. The tire is solidly melded to the axle. First attempt. Hammer at the rim of the tire to loosen it. A good round from both of us. It does not budge. We go through a number of other attempts. Over an hour has passed, and the tire is still in exactly the same place. Perhaps the metal heating and cooling over the years of use has fused the two together. Frustrations are high. The hay continues to dry, ready to be picked up. Eventually, we cut the tire loose with a cutting torch and drop it off at the shop. Using different metal cylindrical parts, we create a new axel. We repair the tines together—one holding tines in place, the other removing and replacing. Everything is ready to go but the tire. The hay continues to dry. The tire shop closes for the day. We are finished whether we want to be or not.

Five Years from Now

I'm visiting home. Maxine is six and is excited to go to our cabin. She misses her cousins, the fresh air, the stars at night, the wood stove. It's fall. Skies will be good—

lots of comets this time of year. Not quite as many as in August, but enough to blow your mind as you lay in the field with blankets and look up at the night skies. I need to learn more star formations for gazing. My dad knew so many.

Maxine is also worried. She is not as loud or as boisterous as her cousins. She doesn't know all the ropes. She isn't from the Valley. Her eldest cousin can easily unseat her because he just naturally knows how, what, why, where, and when, without ever needing to glance at his parents for confirmation. She worries. "Will I know where North is?" "How many cows do they have?" "Do I have to use the outhouse again?" "How come we don't have any animals?" "Should we get a donkey?" As her questions flood our 640-kilometer drive, I realize I often forget her anxieties because of my own. We both anticipate, we both worry. Did I condition her for this? Should I have just moved home full time?

I assure her that the stress, conflict, and care are worth it. As we pull off of the highway onto our gravel road, she seems to levitate in her seat. I pull to a stop a ¼ section before ours and point North.

She yells, "Look Dad, Mom, ELK!–They're our neighbors." A coyote crosses in front of us, just a few meters from a dead one hung on our neighbor's fence. My daughter's voice is in the background incessantly counting the ungulates. Something (us or the coyote) spooks the elk. They scatter and are gone. We drive to our cabin. Unlock it, gather wood, start a fire, haul water in, and then unload our things.

Present

> "The biographic present is not part of a conceptual system; the system is an aspect of the present" (Pinar, 1975, p. 26).

I'm getting ready to go home. The semester is nearly finished. I have one more class, until candidacy prep. I am writing papers for my finals this semester. I have papers

to submit and re-submit for publication. I am brain-dead. I am constantly cooking, cleaning, and caring for others. I sneak my work into the hours that Maxine sleeps or is able to play independently from me.

Today, we go drive out to the country to some crown land. We explore with the dogs and then pick out a Christmas tree and cut it down. A rural tree for an urban house. It will be our own little thing. It is good to make time for just us, that is not merely the doldrum of everyday life tied to the pandemic. To be honest, I don't mind quieter holidays. The pandemic gives my little family space to spend time with each other, often outdoors. It alleviates the pressure to spread ourselves thin in the short bursts of time we are not working. I will go home soon. I miss the land and my family. I'll go for coffee with Yvonne. I'll go to my land and plot out a space for my cabin and sit and think. My present right now is littered with both thoughts on the past and anticipation for the future. My Maxine brings me back to the present. She pulls on my leg. We build a piano fort and her blue eyes sparkle. We read some books in the fort. She finally understands how awesome forts are. We snuggle, giggle, and hide-out from the world.

Analytical

The present is infused with my past and future. I never emotionally left the farm, nor how I ought to care for it. There exists the stressful break at age twenty-three. Yet, my rural self is with me—always. If I get fed up with thinking and writing, which is often, I go to my garage and build something, or fix something, or make some kind of make-shift art with wood scraps; I go into my yard and split wood, garden, or tend to the yard. My past lives in my ability to improvise, fix and make. It lives in my penchant for gardening and cooking. Some of my most important education has been to learn how to build a fire, fix mechanical things, plant and harvest gardens, care and tend for animals, cook for those I love, etc. I use these everyday.

I do not use my academic education in daily tasks, but for the fact that I exist in an academic institution. It is as if I have built a job from my academic training so that I have a use for it. The present is anticipatory. And, centered around daily tasks and caring for my daughter, among others. My daughter brings me into the present in very visceral ways. She is tied to the future because I want her to be a part of the farm and farm life. The future keeps me at an arms-length from my rural upbringing, but it brings me and my family closer into the folds. My future research is a product of how deeply I care about *my rural relations*; past, present, future.

Synthetic

Little me, teenage me, adult me, future me—the farm and rural landscape of the Peace Country is me. The researcher is me. My family is me. There is a line of hurt and separation that runs through me. It is tied to my past, present, and future. Repair and care for my past me, exist in my wish to do research in the rural. I am mobilized to work through the hurt because of the value of everything I gained from a rural upbringing and my ongoing ties to rurality (Corbett, 2013). I am mobilized to work through the hurt towards a future that more relationally includes the farm. I am mobilized to care beyond my natural want to care. I ought to be doing respectful rural educational research. Yet, I worry Eddie may not follow or Maxine may not fit. These are small worries, because Eddie has rural roots and so does Maxine. I worry none-the-less. The self that I am is a deep river and all its channels. The river is a rural, land-based self, running deep from my veins. The channels are all of the offshoots and tangents that remind me daily I am a rural person living in the city. I do not fit in either rural or urban. I do not fit in academia.

But, this not-fitting, is good. It places me in a position of being able to connect, explore, and make within my rural community and as my researching self.

Concluding Remarks

> "Literally, we are holistically—and synthetically … a part of the landscape and the historical event; the aesthetic experience allows us to enter the process of healing and understanding" (Slattery, 2017, p. 189).

The aesthetic is embedded in my style of writing *currere*. I am in the spaces I am writing about. Tenses are inconsequential. I taste the salt lick and feel the gritty substrate embed in the knees of my jogging pants as I crawl across it. I am in a shower, tired after a hard day's work, wondering if my sister is dead, before I know it is true. I am watching helplessly as a calf I was responsible for does not make it. I taste the crumbly, rubbery, cheesy, salty formerly frozen chicken cordon bleu. I am filled with Maxine's infectious, mile-wide smile she has from her grandfather and uncles. I sit on a porch with the land filling the chasm of my chest. I have my hand in Eddie's as we participate in wordless exchanges by the fire place in our part-time rural home.

The synthetic moment feels all encompassing. Past is present is future—is total, holistic and inseparable. I am partial to Slattery's (2017) aesthetic interpretation of the synthetical moment; "nature, life, and self all merge in a phenomenological encounter, a synthetical moment, a visceral rather than visual experience" (p. 192). His description, in line with Pinar's (1975) coherence that comes through *currere*, is an aesthetic and lived coherence, and "not necessarily a logical one" (p. 20). I am grateful to do the visceral work to locate the *I* in my future research and to do the work to strengthen the biography that informs me as a researcher. I feel care that is natural and wanted and care that is an ethical *ought to* (Noddings, 2013). Lastly, I experience all of the tributaries of possible care from me to my rural relationships in and of the extraordinary places we inhabit.

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