CULTURAL AMNESIA
THE CURRICULUM OF REPRESSION AND ASSIMILATION

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This *currere* journey explores the idea of curriculum of repression and assimilation and how the legacies of colonial educational systems in Africa create a form of cultural amnesia, where collective memories are disappearing, are erased or repressed, through generations of students, like myself, who have been and are still systematically trained to look outward but never inward—focusing solely on the external neoliberal global systems but never looking inward on their identity, culture, and being. The imposition of Eurocentric education systems through past colonial rule continues to assimilate Indigenous populations and repress their cultures (Drozdowicz, 2022). I draw parallels to Indigenous peoples because we share common challenges rooted in colonialism, particularly in our ongoing struggles for sovereignty, the preservation of cultural identity, and the pursuit of educational self-determination. Curriculum, as we know, extends beyond a set of standards but is situated as a subjective, lived, and felt educational experience (Poetter, 2024). Building on this idea, curriculum encompasses educational experience, which is a process that takes on the world without appropriating that world, which projects the self into the world without dismembering that self, a process of synthesis and totalization in which all the participants in the dialectic simultaneously maintain their identities and surpass themselves (Grumet, 1976, as cited in Poetter, 2024, p. 41). In essence, curriculum is more than just content or standards; it's about how we experience education, how our identities come together to create something greater and better. Curriculum as a complicated conversation opens the discussion for the complex relationship between subjectivity (one's individual consciousness) and the broader societal**,** cultural**,** historical**,** material**,** and psychic dimensions of life (Casemore, 2024).

This paper draws from Poetter's (2024) book, *Curriculum Fragments*, where he reflected on his life journey and processes that illuminate educational, curricular, and pedagogical possibilities, as well as an entry into the complicated conversation that is curriculum. Memory plays a significant role in Poetter's writing, as he argues that both memory and/or mis-memory are crucial in truth-telling, getting things right, as well as communication. In the same vein, he suggests that, to progress as a society where love prevails, it is essential from an educational perspective to uncover what is hidden and take steps toward expressing, rather than repressing, memory (Poetter, 2024). This idea of memory prompted me to reflect on the role that memory, and even mis-memory or amnesia, have played in shaping my own educational experiences. I began to consider how the memories I hold onto, as well as the ones I may have forgotten or misinterpreted, influence my understanding of knowledge, learning, culture, and identity within my educational experiences.

In *Curriculum Fragments*, Poetter uses the *currere* method—an inquiry method that uses one's own life story or biography as the primary source of insight. Using the *currere* method, I went back in time and imagined what my grandparents' education must have looked like, relate a story of a friend's time in a boarding school, and examine how my educational experience has been assimilative or repressive. The *currere* method offered me a powerful opportunity to introspect, imagine, and to understand the enduring impacts of colonial education and how it has and is still shaping my educational experience, especially how my educational background has

influenced my perception of what is deemed worthy or unworthy of learning. Using this method is refreshing and helpful, as it opens pathways for doing transformative decolonial work.

In this paper, I echo the important and critical questions Poetter raised in his book that are not often asked in the curricular conversation, as it interrogates the self: Who am I? What am I learning? What and who am I becoming? Is my education a systematic training into Western Eurocentric norms? Is my education silencing my being and cultural identity? Poetter's scholarship and teaching influenced me to begin to reflect, introspect, recall, and remember memories that might have otherwise been suppressed or forgotten by using *currere* as a method of inquiry and self-reflection. These questions are explored in this paper and presented as stories, which are historical fiction, self-reflection, and personal narratives that highlight my personal and pedagogical journey (educational experience). I use these fictionalized narratives as a creative way to retell history and to illustrate broader truths about repression and assimilation in education, as well as how I'm imagining the past. These narratives are followed by critical interludes, which are deliberate pauses or reflective segments within my narrative to disrupt and undo linearity, interrogate assumptions, and make broader connections to theoretical sources, similar to Poetter's "reflective interlude" in *Curriculum Fragments*. The critical interlude provides me with a space to take a step back and engage in a critical analysis and make sense of the story so as to resonate with the readers somewhere, somehow with hope that it hits home (Africa). My positionality in this work is as an African Black woman who is deeply engaged in transnational feminism; anti-oppressive and anti-colonial discourses shape how I view the world and engage with this paper.

THE SILENCED PAST

It was a warm morning in British Nigeria. Bola held her slate firmly under her arm. Her missionary school uniform was neatly ironed, socks sparkling white, brown sandals polished, and her afro hair cut short. Bola walked across the bush path to her missionary school in the suburbs of Lagos. Sister Mary, a British teacher, walked into the class, her white starched dress matcheed her white top hat with a lace ribbon wrapped around it.

"Repeat after me," Sister Mary commanded, her tone loud and so sharp that it could pierce a wall. "English is the only language of progress; our native tongues are primitive." The students looked at each other in fear. Bola looked down at her writing slate wondering what the teacher meant. Her mother's tongue was becoming a thing of shame and secrecy. Her grandmother's stories, the community tales by moonlight, the proverbs, and so on were becoming things of the past and systematically erased. Her indigenous culture and traditions were being replaced by British hymns, British history, and a curriculum foreign to her being. Every lesson by Sister Mary and the other sisters was a pre-planned effort towards deculturalization, assimilation, and repression.

During history classes, African civilizations were portrayed as backward and primitive, the old Oyo Empire, the Benin Kingdom, and the great Ife Kingdom were reduced to a mere caricature. One afternoon during lunch break, Bola and her friends were caught speaking Yoruba—their mother's tongue, which was strictly forbidden—the children were publicly humiliated and beaten to a stupor. This was to send a no-nonsense signal to the other students. Their identities and beings were beaten out of them. In a particular geography class, sister Mary drew a map of the world with Britain large and in the center wrote the words, "Civilization starts from here; we bring light to

darkness." Africa's trading routes, and, numeric and counting systems were regulated and suppressed by the hegemony of "euro-modernity."

As years passed, Bola and her classmates became products of this system, educated but disconnected from their culture, identities, and beings. Bola and her classmates could recite Shakespeare and other British literature but struggled to speak or read Yoruba.

CRITICAL INTERLUDE

In this historical fiction, Bola's educational experience represents the lived experiences of my great-grandparents/ancestors who attended schools during the British rule of Nigeria. As noted above, curriculum is not just a set of subjects or common core or standards, but a complex landscape of identity formation, each lesson and interactions with teachers, administrators, or other students but a brushstroke, and more, painting the contours of who we are and might become. In creating the curriculum, the teacher decides what knowledge is of most worth (Eisner, 2001). Why do we need to teach this? To what end? To what extent? Why are we prioritizing British history over another? Why do we think that the content is relevant to students' experiences? Why should we or should we not address certain topics? I like Tienken's (2016) framing of "So What" and "Now What" questions that help probe deeper into the significance and purpose of curriculum in education (p. 106). It's about reflecting on why the curriculum matters and what impact it has on students, educators, and society at large (Tienken, 2016). The British teacher in question, however, did not put into consideration how the curriculum that dehumanized her students and erased their identities and cultures could have damaging impact on the lives of the students she was teaching.

In the same vein, Drozdowicz (2022) argues that the individual is being transformed vastly by the schooling experience, and educational institutions play a significant role in shaping the self, not just in the psychological sense but also in a socio-cultural dimension. I guess it's safe to ask ourselves what kind of human self is formed through Bola's schooling experience. Perhaps one might say a "civilized" subject of the British empire? Frantz Fanon (2005) argues that colonialism denies the humanity of colonized people and separates them from their culture and being. Historically, schools are not neutral and are a part of the machinery and tools for assimilation that annihilate cultural differences from the dominant social discourse and promote a unified, often oppressive, vision of the social order (Drozdowicz, 2022). What we choose to remember, what we consider worthy of remembrance, what should be forgotten or discarded, and what memories are repressed or preserved are all part of the complicated question of what knowledge is of most worth.

FRAGMENTS OF REMEMBERING

Zara wonders why the siren went off at 5:45 a.m. at her new girls-only boarding school. "Wake up, wake up," the senior prefect yelled. Immediately she saw everyone jump off their bunk beds and start to make their beds neatly, with the edges folded in envelope shapes, like they were hospital beds. Prior to her start date at school, her parent had come with her to receive and sign the prospectus—a code of conduct document. This document comprised the do's and don'ts of the boarding school, including courtesy and etiquette for boys and girls. Zara was assigned her duty for the week by the senior prefect; she immediately picked up the watering can and began to water her apportioned garden.

Another siren went off at 6:30 a.m. It was time to march in twos from the dormitory to the assembly ground, and everyone carried a Bible, hymn book, and handkerchief. As she marched down to the assembly ground, Zara could not help but notice that everyone had the same short haircut, same earrings, same sandals, same knapsacks, and uniforms. A short sermon was said at the assembly ground and announcements were made by the school principal who was also an alumna of the school. The school prefects walked around to inspect the students and to enforce other dress code rules, down to the length of their fingernails. At exactly 7:15 a.m. another alarm went off; it was time for breakfast, and the first-year students were responsible for serving the senior students. As soon as food was served, the prefects picked on Zara for eating Fufu with her bare hands. "No, you are only allowed to eat with the cutlery, else you'd be punished," the prefect yelled.

At lunch break, Zara and her friends were overheard by the school principal speaking their native language and chatting loudly. "Come over here!" Mrs. Johnson shouted at the top of her lungs. The girls ran over. "Ladies are only seen and not heard. Speaking in another language loudly is barbaric and uncouth," she advised. Every Sunday morning, students were expected to make their way to the school chapel for Sunday church service. Zara, being a Muslim, tried to pray in her dorm room. "You'll be punished for this. Christianity is the only acceptable religion in this school, and you have no other choice since you signed the prospectus," a senior prefect declared loudly. Zara was asked to weed the grass the whole week as punishment for her prayers. Every night in her dorm room Zara would cry, as she didn't understand why it felt like she was in a regimented camp—a prison—rather than a school.

After three years of secondary school, Zara graduated with good grades. She got a scholarship to study abroad. While the curriculum had positioned her for global success, it had simultaneously excavated her sense of cultural belonging. Each day at the missionary boarding school, each international experience, was another layer of disconnection from her homeland.

CRITICAL INTERLUDE

This story emerged from a long, informal discussion with my friend who attended a missionary school in Ghana. She shared her experiences of conforming to the rigid rules and expectations imposed by the school at the time. While she initially viewed this conformity as simply part of her getting a "good" education, she now reflects on it through a critical lens. Looking back, we (my friend and I) collectively began to problematize these experiences, by recognizing how the school's practices were rooted in assimilationist agendas and colonial ideologies. We critiqued the strict dress codes, code of conduct, and "ladylike" etiquette, which we recognized as the apparatus of cultural repression and mechanisms of cognitive imperialism hidden in the curriculum (Clarysse, 2023).

Friedrich and Shank's (2023) conceptualization of power aligns with the ideas of Michel Foucault (1995), suggesting that, rather than viewing power as merely something that restricts or limits the actions of individuals, power should be seen as something that shapes and produces behaviors and actions. Power, in this context, is not only about imposing limitations but also about actively influencing how individuals behave and interact within societal structures. As Friedrich and Shank (2023) note that uniforms have historically been a technique of disciplinary power. Foucault (1995) identified this form of power as emerging during the early modern period, where it became concerned with the enforcement of strict behavioral rules. This form of power was not

simply about control through restriction, but also about classifying, categorizing, and surveilling people, often in ways that reinforced social hierarchies and maintained order. Friedrich and Shank's (2023) conceptualization of disciplinary power explains why the missionary schools appoint peers (prefects) as surveillants to enforce discipline as a way to maintain social control of the body and identity expression through conformity to approved dress standards to promote supposed "modesty" and "morality."

Additionally, these missionary boarding schools' reinforcement of dress codes or "code of conduct" are not neutral but are designed to impose order and ideology. These rules get replicated over and again, in the ways those in power weaponize religion as a tool to maintain hierarchical relations, control of sexuality, and the facilitation of conformity to group ideologies.

MY (DIS)CONNECTION TO THE LAND

It was the spring semester of my first year of doctoral studies. I had arrived early to my elective class, and we (the students) had all taken our usual seats. Before the class, we had read articles about land as pedagogy and Indigenous perspectives in education. The professor posed a question: "What is your connection to the land?" We formed groups to share our answers and reflections. I sat there, racking my brain, thinking through the question, but I couldn't find any answers. I said to myself, "I don't have any land or landed property, let alone a connection to it." I thought I simply couldn't have a connection to something that I didn't own.

As my classmates began to speak about their connections to the land and their homelands, I gained new insights. One classmate talked about the river in her village and how it brought a sense of calmness to her soul and being. Another classmate shared a story of their mountainous homeland and how they would go hiking to unwind while exploring nature. It was at that point that it dawned on me that my initial thinking about land and my connection to it was rooted in Western epistemologies, which often treat land as property or an economic commodity to be exploited. Later in the class, I shared my own connection to the land, my homeland. I talked about kinship relationships and practices where my parents often made sure that my siblings and I ate together from the same plate to create bonds, foster loving relationships among us, and reinforce a sense of belonging. I also reflected on ceremonies such as marriages, burials, baby christenings, chieftaincy coronations, and other celebrations. All of these and more were my connection to the land. The answers from my classmates had triggered memories that had been repressed or forgotten because I had considered them unimportant.

CRITICAL INTERLUDE

The meaning of land for Indigenous peoples differs from Western conceptions in that, among Indigenous communities, land is conceptualized beyond its physical attributes. Indigenous peoples generally believe that the Land is connected to selfhood, identity, the psyche and memory of the people (Dei et al., 2022, p. 113). The story of my (dis)connection to my land is one that is embarrassing to tell, because, as an African, a Nigerian, I do have interesting cultural stories representing my connection to the land. Not knowing what to say made me question my identity and wonder how I could have forgotten my connection to my homeland. I had lived in Nigeria for 25 years before moving abroad about 3 years ago. Am I being assimilated? Am I being

Americanized? These thoughts and questions clouded my mind. This reminds me of Poetter's (2024) words, "We all repress things that are uncomfortable, bury them, keep them hidden, just to be well and sane to survive" (p. 50). Surviving in the United States often means assimilating, which can include repressing one's salient identity to blend with the crowd, to fit in, and perhaps too embarrassed to admit one's shortcomings (Poetter, 2024).

Baszile (2017) reminds us that the education we receive in schools is part of a hidden curriculum reinforced through other social and cultural institutions and practices that support pedagogies of the Euro-American empire—neoliberalism, imperialism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and so on. She further notes that what is more worrisome is that this learning is largely subconscious. About 95% of our brain capacity functions at the subconscious level, actively receiving and processing thoughts that ultimately direct most of our actions (Baszile, 2017). My initial thoughts about my connection to the land demonstrate how deeply engrossed I have been in Western epistemologies, as it can influence our subconscious thoughts and actions. As a form of contemplative inquiry, *currere* can help us identify subconscious thoughts and patterns of thinking that explain our actions. With the *currere* method, we can work towards dismantling the hegemony of the Western episteme through our thinking and actions (Baszile, 2017, p. viii).

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

These narratives, personal or fictional, foreground external voices and my encounters with others—mentors, professors, peers, and communities—whose perspectives have profoundly shaped my understanding of self, culture, and education. They also raise concerns about assimilation in education where students like myself are pressured to conform to a standard set of norms and values, often reflective of a dominant (Euro-American) culture that may differ from their/my own. This paper illuminates and acknowledges the depth of this cultural amnesia, violence, and erasure. One might say, perhaps, I am a killjoy for disrupting comfort and not romanticizing colonial education as a positive legacy of modernity. Sintos Coloma (2020) contends that a killjoy is not a killjoy from a place of spite, but that it is precisely due to their love for marginalized subjects that we unlearn what we have learned and begin to notice that which we have been taught not to notice even at the risk of generating bad feelings. In other words, it is from the place of love where the killjoy launches their critiques (Sintos Coloma, 2020).

The centuries of systemic inequality, colonialism, racism, and exploitation have left deep scars that persist in schooling structures in colonized countries. These injustices often feel deeply entrenched, making it difficult to imagine systems that completely break away from them. These structures repress memories and stifle imagination about a shiny bright future. Personally, undergoing colonial education has negatively impacted my worldview as a scholar, as it shaped how I perceive hierarchies of knowledge and engage with my identity and culture. It has led to an alienation from my cultural roots and imposed a pressure to conform to Western norms in order to gain validation, while repressing self-expression and authenticity. Erdelyi (2006) described repression as a mental mechanism that inhibits certain ideas from reaching conscious awareness, particularly when they compete for attention. This process can block distressing or uncomfortable thoughts, influencing how we avoid certain ideas, how memory is affected by interference, and how intentional forgetting works. In this context, the failure to question these norms can be understood as a form of repression, where deeply ingrained ideas are kept out of conscious awareness, limiting our ability to critically assess them.

I hope this paper highlights how Eurocentric curricula continue to suppress indigenous ways of knowing, stifle imagination and critical introspection, and maintain the status quo. Lastly, it illuminates how these hegemonic practices often go unquestioned within African schools.

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