POLARIZED FROST
A *CURRERE*-METHOD AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

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My love of poetry was inspired by my father. He has always loved reading and writing poems, and when we were young, he would pay my sister and I one dollar for each poem we memorized (this ended quickly after I began memorizing haiku). I read Frost's (1923/1995) "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening" for the first time in fifth grade, and it captured my curiosity. With each subsequent rereading, I notice a different connection between the work and the world around me.

The following is a series of autoethnographic essays aligned with the four steps of Pinar's (2019) method of *currere* embedded in between lines of Frost's poem. They explore my exposure to polarization and its impact on education in the United States. Political polarization in the United States pervades every corner of our discourse, and education has not been spared. Those invested in education (fiscally, physically, or otherwise) are torn between two paradigms—human capital education aimed at maximizing the economy and self-actualizing education. These essays attempt to reconcile the need to educate students for the workforce, a matter of survival in the United States, and the importance of self-actualizing education. If our students self-actualize, they may lead us out of this era of political polarization.

"Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening"
By Robert Frost (1923/1995)

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

PART I

WHOSE WOODS THESE ARE I THINK I KNOW

Unlike everyone I've ever spoken to, I enjoyed middle school—seventh grade especially. I started seventh grade free from the pit of anxiety that had lived in my stomach during fifth and sixth grade. I had changed schools twice in two years—the first time because my family moved to a new town, the second time because I was starting middle school. I started seventh grade with a newfound sense of equilibrium, and I was grateful for it. The first day of seventh grade was wonderful. I had friends in all my classes, my teachers were funny and kind, and my locker opened on the first try. What more could a middle school girl ask for?

I woke up early on the second day of school—a Tuesday morning. It was a stunningly beautiful day. The sky was a cloudless, clear shade of blue—deep, rich, but still bright—like my favorite crayon in the Crayola box (cerulean). The sun was warm and bright, giving the trees and grass a glowing appearance.

Despite the beauty of the morning, everything went wrong as I was getting ready. I don't remember what exactly the issues were, but I'm sure it had something to do with getting toothpaste on my shirt or being unable to find something important to put in my backpack. I felt frustrated, and as I put on my burgundy Jansport backpack and made my way out the front door to catch the bus, I looked at my mom and said, "Something bad is going to happen today."

The school day started like normal. I figured my prediction was wrong, and we settled into a journaling activity in English class. The prompt was predictable: "What did you do this summer?" I don't remember exactly what I wrote, but I'm sure it had something to do with the beach. We spent every summer in Manasquan, New Jersey.

When we shared our entries, my classmate Shina read about her incredible trip to New York City. I had been there many times—we lived less than 40 miles away. My father worked in Lower Manhattan, and on some weekends, he would take my sister and me to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Natural History, and at Christmastime, to Macy's Herald Square.

Shina's adventure was different—she had gone to Windows on the World at the top of the twin towers of the World Trade Center. Growing up in the shadow of the city, the twin towers were a regular backdrop. We could see them from the waterfront of our old town. I remember my sister excitedly pointing them out to me in the back seat of our family's station wagon on a trip to Sandy Hook. Shina was the only one in our class who had actually been to the 110th floor.

While we shared our stories, the school counselor entered the classroom and handed a memo to my English teacher. He stared at the paper for a moment, then looked at the counselor and asked, "Is this true?" The school counselor replied with a nod and short, "Yes."

This strange interaction foreshadowed the eerie remainder of the day. My classmates began getting checked out of school in droves. My friendly, warm teachers became distant and tense. There was a feeling of panic in the air. I swear I heard the whoosh of fighter jets pass over my school.

The rumors started.

"Iraq fired a missile, and it's going to hit New York at 4 o'clock!" my friend Kerri confided to me in the hallway.

"Someone has a bomb!" another student panicked.

"Someone has a gun!" speculated another.

"There's a fire in New York City!" was another rumor I heard.

All the rumors seemed plausible, and I felt unsettled but not quite afraid. There was obviously something amiss.

"A plane hit one of the twin towers this morning and blew up and caught on fire! And then, like, 20 minutes later, another plane hit the other tower! And then they both were on fire, and they collapsed!" shouted Andrew from the back of the school bus on the way home at the end of the day.

What a ridiculous rumor. It sounded like something he saw in a movie or a video game. He always *had* been attention seeking. I had given credence to the other theories of the day but wrote Andrew's story off as hyperbole—a tall tale.

The bus finally reached my stop around the corner from my house, and I knew something was wrong because my mom was waiting for me. I had walked myself to and from the bus stop through sixth grade. My mother always encouraged us to be independent. After hearing so many frightening and confusing things at school, I was glad to see her. I was desperate to know what exactly was going on.

"Shan, what do you know?" my mom asked me.

"Mom, what's going on? I heard there was a missile, or a fire in the twin towers, or something. I've heard a lot of crazy things today," I said.

"The twin towers are gone," my mom said. "Your father isn't home but he's OK. He's trying to get home."

THE DARKEST EVENING OF THE YEAR

I don't remember what else my mother said on the walk back to the house from the bus stop. I probably ranted and raved. I don't remember what my sister, who was in her sophomore year of high school, did that night. I flopped down on the soft, pink couch in front of the TV and watched the news. I saw footage of the planes crashing into the twin towers of the World Trade Center. I saw 7 World Trade Center sway and crumble live on TV, disappearing from the camera's view into a cloud of dust. I watched a reporter who was embedded with NYFD firefighters walking through the dusty streets of the disaster area, the sounds of the firefighters' safety devices chirping overpowering the reporter's voice. (Today, I can't stand the sound of those devices, and I avoid looking at news footage and photos from September 11, 2001).

The kitchen phone rang. It was my father. He was at the train station in town and needed a ride home. He had finally made it out of the city.

There was a major public transit hub underneath the World Trade Center. As a result, when the buildings were struck, there was major disruption to public transportation. To make it home on September 11, 2001, my father had to walk from his office to Battery Park to get onto a ferry to Jersey City. When he disembarked the ferry, he saw a New Jersey Transit bus parked in the parking lot. He got on the bus and asked the driver where it was headed. "I don't know," the driver told him. My father sat down on the bus, and when it filled up, the driver headed to Metropark Station in Woodbridge, where my father was able to get a train to our town, Matawan.

The most disturbing memory I have of September 11 is my father telling me about the tow trucks that came to the train station parking lot in the days and weeks after the attacks. They came to tow away the cars that hadn't moved from the station since that beautiful Tuesday morning. Their owners had never made it home from work.

MY LITTLE HORSE MUST FIND IT QUEER

The days following the attacks were strange. We talked, vented, panicked, and grieved. We learned who had been killed. Church bells rang constantly. For weeks, the front page of the daily newspaper was covered with hundreds of postage-stamp sized photos of people who had been missing since the attacks—their families desperate for information. I remember feeling particularly sad on September 14. My mom assured me that feeling sad was normal. She warned that there would be a lot of bad feelings in the coming days.

The candles we lit on our front lawns at dusk to symbolize hope and solidarity with everyone suffering after the attacks gradually gave way to American flags and posters proclaiming, "United We Stand." Eventually my house was the only one without an American flag displayed. We never flew the flag at my house—my father always explained that he considered himself a "citizen of the world" whenever I asked. My mother sensed the possibility of tension if we didn't display the flag, so we unfolded the flag presented to my family at my Grandfather's funeral (he was a WWII navy veteran) and hung it in our front window.

School was strange too. In the first weeks following the attacks, we wrote letters to NYPD and NYFD members thanking them for their service. We sang patriotic music in chorus class, especially Lee Greenwood's (1984) "God Bless the USA." I didn't connect with that song nearly as much as another one of my choir director's selections—Bob Dylan's (1963) "Blowin' in the Wind."

As it became apparent that we would enter war with Afghanistan to search for Osama bin Laden and topple the Taliban, the tone of our lessons changed. When asked about contributing to a fund to help children in Afghanistan cope with the war, our life skills teacher said she would not give a dime to children in Afghanistan—she would be giving her money to children in our country who lost parents in the 9/11 attacks instead. As my classmates became more and more fixated on the coming war and retribution for the attack on New York, my discomfort deepened. I couldn't articulate the root of my disquiet, but I was uncomfortable with talk of violence and revenge. How exactly would starting a war with another country change what happened in ours? I couldn't comprehend it. It was as though I had missed something that my peers and my teachers all understood.

I became obsessed with current events after the attacks, and I heard about the PATRIOT Act (2001), which allowed increased surveillance of people in the United States, and about the detention of people suspected of terrorism in Guantanamo Bay. Both actions seemed diametrically opposed to my understanding of American values. Were any of us truly free if our country was detaining people without allowing them to contact lawyers or their families? What happened to "liberty and justice for all?"

In the late fall of seventh grade, we were instructed by our English teacher to write an essay for a local contest. My teacher wrote the prompt on the board. The dusty, white letters read, "Is freedom really free?"

Finally, my chance to address all misgivings and discomforts that had cropped up over the past months since the twin towers fell had arrived. I poured my young, frustrated, and perplexed heart out onto the wide-ruled pages and said no. Freedom is not free because of the way we're treating people in Guantanamo Bay. Freedom, at this moment in the United States, is not free.

I was proud of my entry. I was confident that I had raised compelling and valid concerns. I wasn't sure I would win because it was my first year in honors English, but writing the essay was a relief. My teacher judged the contest, and I was not one of the winners.

TO ASK IF THERE'S BEEN SOME MISTAKE

Instead, Shina, Zach, and Nick were selected from the class. We read their essays, in which they expounded upon the sacrifices our troops made overseas to protect our freedoms. They discussed the revolution that won our freedom from the British, how our country's armed forces saved the world from tyranny during World War II, and how our soldiers were now in Afghanistan laying down their lives to make sure terrorists couldn't steal our hard-won freedom from us.

As I sat in class listening to the winning essays, I realized I had, in fact, missed something. When I saw the prompt, "*Is freedom really free,*" I thought about liberation. My peers and teachers thought about the economics of freedom.

PART II

BETWEEN THE WOODS AND FROZEN LAKE

"Nothing has devalued my profession more as a music educator than the STEM movement," I asserted during a doctoral seminar.

"Shannon, you've got that all wrong," one of my classmates replied, the tiny, digital window of our Zoom meeting allowing me to see deep offense creeping over her expression. "I teach STEM, and my students learn different ways to apply knowledge they've learned in their other classes. They get to creatively experiment and *use* what they're learning."

"You're describing what happens in my classroom every day," I said. "My students do the same thing. We make connections between their core subjects in different ways that help deepen their understanding of what they're learning. The only difference is that STEM is seen as valuable, and the arts aren't."

Why were we both so unaware that our students gleaned similar benefits from their time in our classes? How exactly had we arrived at this moment in education where STEM was essential, but the arts were, as the Cajuns say, "lagniappe" (pronounced LON-yahp, meaning a little something extra).

I studied elementary music pedagogy at Rowan University with a preeminent researcher and advocate for music education. She worked to develop research-based music education curricula and lobbied for music education funding in Washington, D.C. She was, and continues to be, a force.

"Music is auditory cheesecake." My professor wrote Steve Pinker's words on the board of our classroom. My classmates and I were excited by this quote. I remember my friend Matt exclaiming, "Awesome, I love cheesecake!"

My professor launched into a lecture about music's evolutionary significance in helping our species survive. Like a laser-guided missile, she destroyed Pinker's notion that music was dessert. Instead, it was the protein, vitamins, and minerals sustaining human society.

When I started teaching music in elementary and middle schools, I noticed a pattern. District leaders expounded on the importance of music education and the need for every student to have musical opportunities but only allowed students who were performing at or above grade level on state-mandated standardized tests to access music education beyond second grade. Considering the prevalence of racial, cultural, and gender bias hidden in many standardized tests,

these policies placed children from marginalized groups at greater risk of being excluded from opportunities to participate in music education in their schools (Myers, 2021).

I noticed that my colleagues would share how much they loved being in band and chorus when they were in school then would insist my students miss chorus class to finish their "core" subject work. Whenever I said no, my students would cry, "But math is *important*." If my students received a grade lower than an A in chorus class, their parents would lecture, "Of course your class is important … but it's chorus."

I continued to be puzzled by this duplicity—music education is valuable but not important—until I read *The Politics of American Education* by Joel Spring (2011) in graduate school. In his book, Spring (2011) posits that education in the United States follows a human capital model, meaning its purpose is to prepare children to become workers to build the economy, with less of emphasis on preparing well-rounded individuals. Music and arts education are not highly valued in the human capital model because arts education is not seen as preparing children for the workforce in the same way that STEM fields are (Spring, 2011).

When I was enrolled in the education program at Rowan University, we were taught that our goal in educating our students was to achieve self and group actualization. The process of self-actualization involves students realizing their full potential (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Once students achieve self-actualization, they become more concerned with matters beyond themselves (D'Souza & Gurin, 2016). My professors referred to this process as "group-actualization." People who are self-actualized display more solidarity, care, problem solving, and altruism (D'Souza & Gurin, 2016).

If the present and future of education in the United States is dictated by the human capital model, will educators be empowered to help our students see their individual and collective potential to shape their world?

AND MILES TO GO BEFORE I SLEEP

I have long been skeptical of us-versus-them rhetoric, which dissuades me from trudging into a debate over human capital education versus self-actualization. The two are not necessarily mutually exclusive. We must be aware that human capital education can quickly become dehumanizing when we treat students as empty vessels into which teachers deposit knowledge (Freire, 1968/2000). In United States, employability is a matter of survival. It would be an injustice to our students if we failed to equip them with the skills they need to gain employment and, thus, survive in our country. Moving into the future, our challenge is to enable our students to survive adulthood while empowering them to imagine and build a just, peaceful, and generous society.

How can educators and educational leaders rise to this challenge? Our mission is to completely reimagine the status quo. This is a daunting task that requires critical examination of how the status quo is beneficial to some but harmful to others. Educators must step far outside our comfort zones and consider how we perpetuate this inequality.

This critical reflection can seem impossibly uncomfortable. I draw inspiration from the work of psychologist Marshall Rosenberg, who developed a dialogic process language called Nonviolent Communication. Rosenberg and Eisler (2003) spell out a vision for a school system that abandons what Rosenberg calls *Domination Education* in favor of what he calls *Life-Enriching Education*. His vision for schooling involves the creation of a partnership between teachers and

students similar to Freire's (1968/2000) concept of the student-teacher and teacher-student (Rosenberg & Eisler, 2003).

Shifting our mindset towards teacher-student partnership could be a significant first step towards a system of schooling that enables our students to reimagine the status quo. As we critically consider the status quo in the United States and the system of schooling we facilitate, we must remember that we are working towards the day when we toss the "keys" to our students, and it will be their turn to drive. Will they be fearful, aggressive, or considerate drivers?

PART III

HE GIVES HIS HARNESS BELLS A SHAKE

"You're a public-school teacher?" a woman asked me as we exercised in the pool, "You're not teaching those kids Critical Race Theory are you?"

"I'm so glad you asked," I said, concerned that she may attempt to drown me. I explained that I was a doctoral student in education and could confidently say that it wasn't being taught at my school or any other school in my district. Critical Race Theory is, I explained, a framework for examining other issues, not a subject that would be taught in elementary school.

"Well, you're not teaching them that it's OK to be gay, are you?" she asked.

My fear of being drowned in the middle of water aerobics resurfaced. I came out as a lesbian when I was 23. By 30, I had come out in most areas of my life, but as a rule, I avoid talking to people when I exercise. Poor Terri had no idea that she was sharing the pool with her worst nightmare—a lesbian scholar of critical pedagogy.

"Learning tolerance for people who live life in different ways is an important skill for everyone," I said. She agreed, seemed satisfied, and we continued to exercise. At the end of the class, I was more emotionally exhausted than physically spent.

As uncomfortable as my time at that gym was, it made me realize how polarized we have become. Signs of radicalization crept into the gym—from prayers before exercise classes because so many people had "Failed to follow His plan" to discussions of how the Covid-19 vaccine was a tool for genocide against the white middle class.

OF EASY WIND AND DOWNY FLAKE

At my physical in 2022, my doctor and I talked about our situation in the United States. The Dobbs v. Jackson (2022) decision had just been handed down, and we were both upset. As we chatted, she made the comment, "My son is 17. His life is so easy right now because when you're young, everything is black and white. Things are right, things are wrong. People are good, people are bad. As you get older, you realize that everything is gray."

It would be easy to write my former exercise companions off as ignorant or hateful, but it isn't that simple. The people I exercised with were just like me—they had loved ones, traditions, favorite foods, and a desire to make sense of the world around them. With climate change driving natural disasters and a pandemic unlike any in our lifetime, the world has never been more difficult to understand. It's the perfect climate for polarization to proliferate.

TO WATCH HIS WOODS FILL UP WITH SNOW

The desperation I witness in the people around me today echoes the confusion of the days, months, and years immediately following September 11, 2001. My exercise companion's questions about Critical Race Theory reminded me of the questions I would get when I voiced disagreement with the United States's invasion of Iraq in 2003.

"Do you hate democracy? You don't want those people to be set free?" asked one of my classmates.

"That's anti-patriotic. Those people killed 3,000 of us," said another.

"Support the troops! Freedom isn't free!" These slogans were emblazoned on yellow ribbon car magnets, posters, t-shirts, and coffee mugs, and blared from the television.

Freedom was the undercurrent powering the call to war in the early 2000s, the resistance to safety precautions against Covid-19, the fear of acceptance of queer people, and public aversion to Critical Race Theory. Our obsession with freedom isn't free. Its high price tag is polarization that has turned the schoolyard into a battleground, and we have become blind to the humanity of the people we are fighting. When we fight amongst ourselves, we become distracted from the pressing issues at hand—things like public health, gun violence, and climate change. We limit civil liberties to exert dominance over our "opponents."

Education can quell polarization if we allow it. Through music education, I was able to help students understand the human impact of historical events. In this way, music education is profoundly humanizing. It offers a view of shared humanity across time and geographical distance. Seeking shared humanity in others (especially those we disagree with) through schooling could be world-changing.

PART IV

THE WOODS ARE LOVELY, DARK AND DEEP

September 11, 2001, made me a pacifist. It was preteen, self-righteous, contrarian commitment that drove my opposition to President Bush's decision to launch the invasion of Iraq in 2003. In adolescence, I had a surface-level understanding of nonviolence. Being nonviolent simply meant no hitting, kicking, punching, shooting, stabbing, wounding, maiming, or killing.

I became trapped in a violent relationship in my 20s. She never raised a hand to me but kept me in a holding pattern, isolating me from my friends and family and sabotaging my efforts at professional success. She convinced me I was a selfish and abusive partner and demanded I seek mental help. I complied.

As I went to therapy, a theme emerged. It was difficult for me to talk about my feelings so people around me could understand. The therapist handed me a copy of the book, *Nonviolent Communication* by Marshall Rosenberg (2005). Intrigued by Rosenberg's use of the word "nonviolent" in the title, I borrowed it from her. It remained in my backpack for months, unopened.

Week after week passed, and I continued to complain to my counselor that I just couldn't get my students, my family, or my partner (who, in hindsight, I'm not sure she counts) to understand what I was trying to express.

"Did you read *Nonviolent Communication*? Go read it," she said bluntly.

Fortunately for me and unfortunately for my students, it was standardized testing season. I was serving as a hall monitor and had four hours of uninterrupted reading time daily for one week. I had no idea that my time as a hall monitor would be transformative. The book not only allowed me to speak clearly, but it also shifted my perspective. Every single person, I learned, shares the same fundamental needs as myself (Rosenberg, 2005). The term "violence" is not limited to physical violence but includes emotional violence, which is hidden throughout our communication in judgments, comparisons, denial of responsibility, and domination (Rosenberg, 2005).

Rosenberg's book not only shifted my perspectives—it renewed my interest in nonviolence as a practice. After the murder of George Floyd, a Black man, by a white Minneapolis police officer sparked nationwide protests about systemic racism and police brutality across the United States, social media posts invoking Dr. Martin Luther King and his campaign of nonviolent activism were widely circulated to shame protesters. While sanctimonious memes were spread by (white) influencers, I saw an e-book of King's most famous speeches on sale for $1. I prefer primary sources over memes, and I never pass up a bargain, so I bought the book and started to read.

As I devoured Dr. King's words, I felt inspired and outraged. Dr. King's words were sincere, empathetic, understanding, and visionary. My education diluted his thoughtful, radical philosophy to one sentence—"I have a dream."

Dr. King had a dream of a beloved community where racism, bigotry, and prejudice would be replaced by a spirit of inclusivity (King Center, 2022). This inclusive spirit would compel the community to meaningfully address poverty and physical violence (King Center, 2022). Dr. King dared to dramatically reimagine the status quo in the United States, and it cost him his life. The system that educated me had erased the heart of King's mission.

I understand why people on social media used Dr. King's image and words to shame protesters. We weren't taught the depth of his commitment to justice. In his lifetime, King was reviled and threatened by many white people but remained steadfast in his commitment not to "defeat or humiliate the white man" (King, 2001, p. 130) when working for justice.

My education diluted King's message, and I wonder what else was watered down.

AND MILES TO GO BEFORE I SLEEP

Freire (1968/2000) says problem-posing questions are vital to dialogic, liberating education. Educators are posed with the problem of being pulled in the apparently opposing directions of human capital education and self-actualizing education (D'Souza & Gurin, 2016; Spring, 2011). Both directions have value. Human capital education can shield students from a life of poverty (Spring, 2011). Self-actualization can inspire students to care for the community that surrounds them (D'Souza & Gurin, 2016).

I wonder if human capital education has eclipsed self-actualizing education because self-actualized people can transform the status quo (Pinar, 2019). The status quo works well for those whose way isn't blocked by prejudice and various systemic "-isms." Self-actualizing education gives students the ability to visualize a world closer to King's "Beloved Community" and Rosenberg's "Life-enriching" education (D'Souza & Gurin, 2016; Freire, 1968/2000; King Center, 2022; Rosenberg, 2003). Our defense of the status quo is reinforced by our failure to teach full depth of King's vision—a United States where dignity for everyone takes precedence over defeating, dominating, or humiliating others (King, 2001).

Polarization has resulted in restrictions that prevent teaching about race, sexual orientation, and gender identity across the United States (Lavietes, 2022; Ray & Gibbons, 2022). These laws stifle education beyond what is included in the (scripted) curriculum and guarantee that the next generation of students will receive the diluted version of Dr. King's message that I did. These students will be able to gain employment in the future, but stifling dialogue will keep self-actualizing education on back-burner, ensuring the continuation of the status quo.

AND MILES TO GO BEFORE I SLEEP.

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