Currere, Antiblack Racism, Education, Amphitrite, and Shadow Swimming

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Regression Part One - Vignette One - The Ordinariness of Buttons

Recently, I returned to and continued my effort of putting things to rights, that in spite of foresight and effort had nonetheless been repeatedly exposed to flood waters. I opened a crumpled paper bag and found another bag. And inside that bag—buttons. I took the button bag to a worktable. Sipping tea, I began to sort. No plan or criteria. No categories in mind. Sorting like that drew my attention to the randomness of my behavior. What was I doing? Some parts of my mind seemed not panicked, but slightly concerned, mildly anxious. There was no plan. Another part of my mind said, "It's okay. See what happens." A few minutes later, I looked at a few piles of buttons. One was twice as large as the others. But I couldn't see a rationale. I realized at that moment that I had put some buttons in one pile and some in other piles and that, a day or two or even a year or two later, I could sort the buttons in completely different ways.

Two buttons that I had thought were gaudy, bereft of the strong designs of the more graphic geometric shapes, patterns, and basic colors of the lot, caught my attention precisely because they seemed a bit over-done.

They appeared overdone even when compared to larger, more three-dimensional metallic gold buttons with distinctive, elaborate designs. I wondered what these buttons were designed for. How were they to be worn? How had they been worn? Had they been worn? On a coat, a jacket, a dress, a sweater? What space was left empty by their removal? Or what space remained empty because they never took up their intended place? The buttons weren't identical. Did they speak of similar or related stories? In their difference, had they had the audacity to adorn, to fasten, to hold together, the same garment at the same time? If so, how long had they been together? What consternation, if any, had they caused the owner, the wearer of the garment where they simultaneously worked and adorned? What puzzlement, curiosity, delight, disapproval had they engendered or provoked in those who saw them together? What appreciation, recall, and admiration had they sparked by their proximity, by their possible shared metaphoric, cultural, mythological, conceptual

references? What consideration of symbolic ideas and associations had they invited from the maker, the purchaser, wearer, the admirer, the viewer? Were reactions to them immediate or delayed, growing slowly over time?

These are buttons that attract touching, feeling, holding, prolonged looking, and most of all, weighing. They have depth. They have stories. They drew my attention and curiosity. The cultural and world history story(ies) they tell of war, racism, genocide, escape, class, privilege, art, adornment, transatlantic trade, wealth, survival, the making of small art to survive, and water. I've often wondered whether the hundreds of thousands of Black souls that filled the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean (Turner et al., 2020) looked up and troubled the waters at the passing of over 12 million Africans into slavery—never to be free.

I do not know the story of how these buttons came to be in an old paper bag in my house, whether thrift store or garage sale. Nor do I know how they came to be among a hundred or so other pictographic buttons—unsigned, unmarked, unnamed, unfamed buttons. Did they cross the Atlantic by ship as African slaves had? Images on both buttons are embossed. One of a rider, perhaps Amphitrite on a dolphin. The other, a prancing horse, tail high, perhaps Poseidon. Both have textured waffle-patterned backs. Gold leaf beneath glass, their metal thread shanks are held in place by a brass engraved plate with maker's marks—a six-leaf potted plant or flower encircled by the words "Schutz Marke" and "Made in England – Bimini LTD." Did Amphitrite notice the drowning of nearly two million Black Africans? Did she and her dolphins rush to save drowning slaves bound for America? Did she and her sister nereids cry out in alarm and protest to save Black Africans bound for generations upon generations of slavery and racism?

These buttons carry cultural myths, ancient beliefs, centuries old. Their backs tell of human strife, persistent hatred, and survival that is now world history, decades old, nearly a century. They tell of Jewish artists, businessmen, and workers who fled Austria for England, escaping Nazism. They tell of small work to make a living. Needles crossed histories as they passed through shanks, pushing threads that entangle and wrap around each other, joining button to cloth, one life to another, one human history to another—a future for fastening and unfastening, holding fast. Perhaps they pull the fateful golden threads of Amphitrite, threads that begin and end, pulling together, separating, yet always within reach, binding and releasing, C-centering the body, and the mind, allowing the body/mind to take off, put on, time, and time again, serving the body and the mind, always challenging the strength and fidelity of the threads that connect, the hands and fingers that would fasten and the mind and spirit that would seek rest in assurance. These are no ordinary buttons, but everyday objects making other everyday objects special (Dissanayake, 1988)—making an everyday ordinary experience special.

What does it mean to make the ordinary and the everyday special? What would it mean to teach African American children as though their every moment is special? Without an education, without teachers who are committed to changing their own perceptions, teachers who are committed to creating learning spaces and places that recognize, see, support, and make spaces for Black visibility and the humanity of Black students, social antiracism transformation is not possible. Opportunities for special moments present themselves to all of us every day (Jackson, 2000), inside classrooms and outside classrooms. But we rarely connect with them, enjoy them, learn from them. And sadly, schools almost never teach students how they might engage in and create an unambiguous reality that does not include the immoralities, distortions, and painful realities of antiblack racism (Banaji et al., 2021; Stovall, 2023). Education ought to support African American students, helping them to become visible to themselves and visible to others (Duncan et al., 2023).

REGRESSION PART TWO - VIGNETTE TWO: "MY SOUL LOOKS BACK IN WONDER"

From an early age, I was aware that what I said and did, whether I said or did nothing at all, what and how I thought, and in particular, how I looked would be subjected to direct and indirect criticisms in every circumstance by innumerable persons, whether in classrooms, outdoors, in books, in movies, on television, radio, in songs, by an endless array of people, at any time anywhere. This is embedded in me from my personal past and America's great and wide collective past. There is a long, sanctioned, and persistent history of judging and criticizing African American women and girls, including the appearances of our hair and clothing (Johnson, 2020; Nasheed, 2018; Winters, 2016).

Many years ago, a secretary led me into an office and pointed to a chair. I took the seat offered opposite the school's principal. He continued to pour over some paperwork, refusing to even glance at me, refusing to acknowledge that I was there, making me invisible. I had come under a different kind of antiblack surveillance when I entered his office. He asserted both individual and institutional privilege and power, forcefully and unnecessarily proclaiming the fact that the principal's office is, and has always been, a white public space—white property, a place of domination and inequality. For Black students, teachers, and parents (Marchand et al., 2019), the principal's office is often a distilled, intensified white supremacist configuration of space, time, ideas, material, things, and people. He sought to make me a thing, like the desk, chairs, carpet, walls.

We'd never met before. Five minutes into waiting I suggested that I would reschedule and come back when he had more time. The constructed spectacle of visually waiting and going unrecognized was not the first time I'd experienced that particular form of social inequality, social domination, invisibility. He said that it wouldn't be necessary for me to reschedule. I tentatively put out my hand, but he either didn't see or saw and decided to ignore that small typical gesture of greeting. He remained seated behind his desk. I've experienced similar hostile individual-as-institution non-greetings many times.

We began to talk about the possibility of some of my university students coming to his school to work with his art teacher and her students. His next words were to tell me that I wasn't what he'd expected, that he had expected to meet someone who looked like she'd fit into the neighborhood where his school was located. He angled his head and repeated a word I'd used when he'd asked me to briefly outline my understanding of our proposed partnership. I thought he was about to continue commenting on the way I spoke. So, I cut him off by asking a rather routine question about his school. I asked, "How many students attend your school?" Linguistic racism (Johnson et al, 2021) was something I'd experienced many times before as well. But my question did not stop him. Diverted from what he was going to say about a word I'd used, he instead (or was it already on his list of criticisms) commented on the way I was dressed— a sweater with semi-matching cardigan, khakis, black flats. He pointed to the circular gold-toned pin on my sweater and chuckling or smirking (I couldn't tell which, maybe both) said, "That's fancy." He was telling me that I was over-dressed, and that an over-dressed Black woman would not be accepted or welcomed by the Black and Latinx students at his school. Given the rate at which Black women have left, have historically been forced out of the classroom, out of education (Benson et al, 2021; Kohli, 2018), if he, or anyone, said that to me now, I think I'd have difficulty not showing my own contempt, not contempt at his lack of awareness and understanding of his own racism, but at his extraordinarily heightened level of white racial arrogance toward his students and a whole neighborhood of people he was presumably there to teach and lead.

I remember taking a good look at his clothes and the clothes his office staff and teachers wore. With the exception of my gold-toned pin, I thought their clothes seemed similar to mine. At the time, I supposed that there-in lay the problem. If I was going to be successful, if I was going to make that particular school-university partnership work, I would need to dress differently. But I already hadn't stayed entirely true to myself. Nevertheless, my "dress switching," putting on a white mask (DuBois 1903/2018) hadn't succeeded. Or had it? It had to some extent led him to engage in a more accentuated, enhanced, and overt performance of hyper-visible white supremacy. I wondered whether he had purposefully, knowingly, cast aside usual normative ways in which dominant white culture fabricates African Americans as both visible and invisible at the same time? But in order to help my students and P-12 Black and Latinx students they would teach, I knew what he wanted from me to seal the deal. I needed to try to more exactly approximate a notion of blackness visible to him, projected by him, and expected by him, an idea of blackness that he could recognize, would acknowledge and accept, an idea of blackness that he thought his students would recognize and accept, the blackness that existed in his mind's eye and that also perhaps existed throughout his school, the blackness that he cast upon his students every moment of every day. I wonder now whether there was anything that I could have done, at least momentarily, to create a simultaneous space in which I could help him to recognize my being as existing outside of his mind's projections and antiblack racist history, a being of blackness that challenges white projections of visibility and invisibility of African American existence, in a reality, in a space, not created by white notions of Black visibility nor invisibility (Ellison, 1952), while also negotiating a school-university partnership aimed at challenging the over-determined (Thomas-Woodard et al., 2024) Black bodies of students in his school.

Currere offers me the space to create an ontological flux that challenges, that rejects white supremacy demands and limitations of Black life, Black reality. As a teacher educator, engaging in *currere* means considering the persistent material, political, economic, cultural, and aesthetic impact of white partitioning of Black people over an expansive period of time, over many, many lifetimes, in an endless array of spaces in material reality. *Currere* allows for the convergence of time and space and racism as a political aesthetic, the aesthetic of racism ever shaping and simultaneously blocking the reshaping of our perceptions, sensations, affect, effort, and being. To engage in *currere* is to enter one possible stream at a point that could trickle into anti-racism work that, even when blocked, could still perhaps overflow and open into an ocean that affirmatively shapes my perceptions, sensations, awareness, understanding as a Black woman.

Progression: Vignette Three - The Coldness of Windy Ghosts in the Present

On a sunny, very cold winter's afternoon, not too long ago, as university students, teachers, and elementary students all worked alongside each other at a predominantly Black and Latinx school, a fire drill sounded. We all walked down to street level. We shivered as icy winds took turns blowing at us from different directions. We waited. And waited. We shifted our feet and turned our backs to the winds. Some teachers took off their scarves and wrapped them around their students. Others snuggled students underneath their oversized winter sweaters. We continued to wait. Some began to suggest, out loud, that a new policy was needed. That teachers and students needed to be told to have their coats ready to wear when scheduled fire drills fell on days with below freezing temperatures.

We looked in the direction we expected to hear and see the "all clear." We continued to wait. In the distance, we saw the principal inspecting lines of students and teachers on both sides of the street. As she approached our lines, we expected she would soon give the all-clear signal. Instead, she looked down at a kindergartener's pants and told him to tell his mom to sew the hems of his pants. She chastised his mom in absentia. She said that his mom "should have known better than to send you to school like that." She asked *him* why his mother had "bought clothes too big for him." It was as if she'd said, "Tell your mother to stop being poor." She spoke as if wearing a poorly fitting school uniform had been a choice. She apparently did not know the tradition of buying and getting hand-me-down clothes, including school uniforms, that children would "grow into."

In spite of visibly shaking from the cold, the kindergartener had been smiling up at the principal as she approached our location. He knew who she was. But now, after a brutal public shaming of him and his mother, he put a finger in his mouth, lowered his eyes and his head, and started to cry as students around him began to giggle. He had become an object.

The hems of his pants were ostensibly held in place by large safety pins, which was not enough to prevent three to four inches of fabric from engulfing and almost completely covering the bottoms of his shoes. I found myself wondering why the principal hadn't quietly said something to his teacher, hadn't sought the help of any number of adults who could have effected a temporary fix—a fix that surely would have prevented the possibility of him accidentally tripping, falling, and hurting himself and, perhaps even more important, spared him from public shaming and spared the principal herself from engaging in an educational, life, and spirit damning act. Did she not know that her words would make it difficult for him to focus and learn, to engage with his teacher and his classmates when they returned to class? The condition of his clothes instantiated our nation's legacy of African American poverty, calling to mind long overdue reparations needed to redress the economic wealth gap caused by white supremacy (Green et al., 2021; Scott & Rodriguez Leach, 2024). *Currere* requires that I not look away from daytime antiblack hauntings. Being physically present in low-income, urban neighborhoods and schools means encountering innumerable hungry, greedy, unforgotten, powerfully malignant, shape-shifting ghosts born of racism that rise up and connect the present to the past (DuBois,1920/1999).

Clothing as an expression of self has always been denied to Black people, Black women (Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, 2025; Walker, 2016). Race, class, and gender determined what African American women were allowed to wear during slavery, when and how they could wear it, and what they could signal by the ways they wore it (Flewellen, 2022). Many schools in low-income communities have strict dress codes and uniforms requirements (Ansari et al., 2022). Parents and students have been told that dress codes will make dressing for school more economical and equitable, learning more accessible (Brown, 1998). Not only are school uniforms expensive; school uniforms are a red herring, a distraction, and wholly irrelevant as a means for achieving educational equity (Baker & Weber, 2021). What happens to poor African American children who go to school under-dressed, inappropriately dressed, dressed in ill-fitting clothes is well-documented (Horvat & Antonio, 1999). In-school social stigmatizing experiences impact students' learning encounters with others (Mims & Williams, 2020), their ability to go to school, pay attention, and learn while in school.

Schools perpetuate the hyper-visibility and invisibility of Black life as defined by whiteness. Schools perpetuate white domination (Najarro, 2022). Living Black life, inside, outside, and at the borders of white supremacy has continually made me aware of my realities and my history, African American history, and the perpetual necessity of fugitivity (Givens, 2021) from an

early age. In church on Sundays, and during times of heightened stress and narrow escapes, we affirmed our existence, our very being, as together we sang—"My soul looks back in wonder, how I got over" (Ward, 1951, n.p.). It is a song that speaks to the persistent historical, social, cultural, economic, and political struggles of African Americans who acclaim and, for over 400 years, have continued to seek and claim our human rights.

The gold buttons of Amphitrite and Poseidon have reminded me of the continuing presence of the past in the now. Engaging in *currere* means considering white dominated history, conceptualizations, expectations, and demands upon the reality and existence of what Black visibility and invisibility, should be, can be, ought to be, must be. *Currere* requires that I recognize and accept that I have always been part of what happens in schools and in teacher preparation in America. It is not possible to be outside nor to assume a view from a distance. *Currere* encourages me to examine and consider ways of countering day-to-day practices of institutional racism that are diffused throughout teaching and learning and deeply embedded in my own life experiences. *Currere* is an important space for agency. And it could be a space for developing a critically active responsiveness to everyday semiotic racist practices (Timmermans & Tavory, 2020).

Analysis: When Will the Rounds Go Higher and Higher?

Buttons, a gold-tone fashion pin, and school uniform pants hemmed with safety pins opened and invited me into a space, a *currere* space, that prompted thoughts about race, education, aesthetics, teaching, and learning. These small everyday things are linked to large social factors that collectively and simultaneously continue to lead to the degradation of Black learning and Black life. How do I make sense of these stories, my experiences? When I compare them, when I look beyond their surfaces, what do I see? How do they inform my work as a teacher educator? It seems that what is, is not there as it was.

I'm not sure whether the principal, who questioned the way I looked, the way I sounded, my body, and my being, was aware of the ways in which he intertwined education, race, history, economics, class, gender, and aesthetics and, therefore, the political power that had been bestowed upon him—a power that he may have presumed, and then assumed, as his birth-right. Reviewing my regression and progression phases of Pinar's (1975) *currere* method have led me to consider whether there is at least one important similarity between my interaction with the principal and my interaction with the buttons. They both involve aesthetics and power.

My interaction in the principal's office was very pointed, antiblack, political, and aesthetic. Dominated and primarily performed by him, at the time, my interaction with him had not prompted me to search for or consider possible layers of meaning. His meanings were clear. He *had* preconceived notions. He *had* established categories and limitations of what he thought a Black woman ought to look like, sound like, and be. My actual presence and interaction with him were to be constrained by his choosing, his commands, his predeterminations. At the time, I remember thinking that I was superfluous. Now, I wonder if he saw me as gaudy—the way I had initially seen the gold buttons of Amphitrite and Poseidon as gaudy.

When I consider my initial interaction with the buttons, I'm struck by how my attempt to sort the buttons affected my perception. I began by looking at them and considering different ways to group, sort, or otherwise categorize them. I tried several different ways of organizing and arranging. I had no particular measure, no metric, no gold standard, no benchmark. No criterion seemed more important, more established, more credible than any other. That resulted in an initial

sense of uneasiness. I had not confidently selected or applied a pre-existing rule for determining which buttons ought to be in one group and which in another. My first contact with the buttons had triggered a question I was not aware I'd asked, "How should I sort these buttons?" I hadn't asked myself, "What are these buttons, what do they tell me?" I simply thought, "Here are buttons; let me fit them into different groups." I hadn't even asked myself why I should group them at all. It had taken me a few minutes to realize that.

Engaging with the buttons in that way suggested that aesthetics is not only for use when considering what is aesthetically valuable or what is aesthetic or what is art, but rather that aesthetics already is a social practice (Sartre, 1976), a social practice that can call me to question the meaning, function, politics, and purposes of education and schooling in low-income, predominantly Black urban communities. Through a white supremacy lens, aesthetics, enjoyment, creativity, and belonging are inherent white rights that are not afforded to Blacks (Harris, 1993). In low-income Black communities, democratic schooling does not cohere with democracy's ideal notions of freedom, well-being, and prosperity, but rather reinforces democratic government or governance (Bergin & Rupprect, 2016; Scott & Rodriguez Leach, 2024). Education and schooling in Black communities are models of democratic policy and policing, government and governance.

Synthesis: Vignette Four - Shadow Swimming (Action—Asking Myself and My Students to Create Possible Futures, What Could Be Possible)

As a teacher educator, each semester I invite future teachers to consider teaching everyday aesthetics as part of existent and necessary human engagement, an essential right of African Americans. I ask them to consider how they can teach all of their future students to search for beauty; not just the beautiful. And instead of primarily, and most often, exclusively, looking for, critiquing, and reproducing well-known art and design standards and criteria, I encourage them to consider teaching a wider range of possibilities for what counts as worthwhile and good. My repeated requests and invitations are partially humored and considered by a few as okay, but unrealistic. I am grateful for that small progress. In most instances, however, my requests usually go unheard, unanswered, misapprehended, or simply and directly ignored. Some responses are brutally candid. I'm told that what I'm asking is too much, that no one is doing what I'm suggesting, that what I'm asking can't be done (Kennedy & Soutullo, 2018). Some spurn the notion of teaching students to search for beauty in everyday things, in their everyday experiences and relationships with others, in their creative ideas and what ifs. They say doing so would make them pariah, put them at risk of losing their jobs, or worse. I notice that they all seem quite cognizant, in one way or the other, of the challenge of acknowledging and acting against antiblack racism. I am grateful for that small progress. Many begin where many teachers have remained for over 50 years, tentatively committing to showing students images of art works by Black artists like Romare Bearden. They fall far short of asking, or committing to ask, themselves and their students how the art works by Black artists were/are affected by, and are viewed through, the quest for freedom, resistance to systemic racism or how neoliberal art world and school educational practices perpetuate systemic racism. I am not surprised that future teachers do not wish to engage themselves or their future students in deeper, more complex, inextricable links between aesthetics and racism. Sometimes their indifference, numbness, refusal, trepidation, anger, outrage, and fear

are overwhelming. And I have to acknowledge that perhaps submerging and doing more work below may be needed before coming to the surface again (Ellison, 1952).

Beauty in everyday ordinary things like buttons is real and available to all of us. There is an urgency to teach new teachers, especially future teachers of Black students, to find, see, engage in that beauty as the right of all Black students as human beings and as a form of liberation, of freedom and self-creation, being, and self-being for all students (Warren et al., 2020). What do I need to do to make this a reality? How do I, how do we, unravel education's complicity with white supremacy? What are the best possible ways to educate teachers and students into an anti-racist future? Or is it simply too late for that (Ellison, 1952)?

Conclusion: Seeing through Muddy Waters

My mind is blank when I start to consider what kind of garment I might sew these buttons onto. What kind of garments can I wear that will not mark me? What parts of my Black body do I want to bind? As an older Black woman in 21st century America, I am, as I have been all my life, keenly aware of the cultural limitations placed upon my body and my being. Through *currere*, I find that even small things like buttons and safety-pinned hems draw my attention to persistent murky waters, unwanted and troubled waters—turbulent waters that call for calm and clarity as I attempt to examine what my educational experiences have been and how they have shaped what I think and do now and what I might be able to think and do in the future.

Currere writing surfaces things only temporarily veiled. *Currere* writing illuminates what I'm supposed to ignore, shining light onto what's missing, absent, or shrouded in deeply shadowed waters. *Currere* brings my attention to a sharper seeing of what has always been here, what should have been here, what could have been here, and what might be here in the future. Revisiting the past activates the present, creating new understanding, a new context, and new possibilities. Pinar (1975) says that the past is available in the present and in the future.

Education and life in low-income communities should not exist in a ghostly realm that young African American students may only come to recognize and understand after much harm is done (DuBois, 1903/2018). The future education of African American children should be unfettered. Looking back, that has never been the case. The history of African American education and life in America has been over-determined, has been projected by the certainty of white supremacy for hundreds of years. Teaching, learning, and related research ought to be guided by a focus on students' lived experiences in relation to a curriculum (Pinar, 2006). Research should seek to wash away antiblack racism in school curricula (Beck, 2024).

Can the co-interactions, the co-dependency, the safety-pinned, stitched bindings that connect education and racism, the tattered seams where they may be rendered, separate, "tear[ing] down that veil" (DuBois, 1903/2018, p. 6)? Can places called "school" become places for making new, affirming, interwoven ways of learning to live? I think that re-stitching to form new, different, and more equitable educational, social, and economic bindings would have mattered in the past. It matters now. And I think it will matter to African American students in the future. It can make a difference in their lives and in the lives of those who live and learn where they live and learn.

With tears enough to turn too long unhemmed pants to fins, to swim to an ocean of joy, for me, *currere* is a kind of shadow swimming, moving forward, watching my shadow as I go—analyzing, adjusting, advancing body, mind, feeling, gaining insights into the shapes of my movements in less than clear waters, making effort to arrive at a place where there truly is a bottom,

a real and enduring end to antiblack racism. Through this *currere*, I've noticed how objects, simple things, can spark thoughts that initially seem only barely related—most often, not directly related at all—how things can bring to my attention links—personal, cultural, and world histories that I was unaware of. Objects and things that prompt memories of experiences and thoughts of possibilities, make if not kinship at least connection. I notice how *currere* can cause objects to seem to lose some of their own solidity, becoming spectral, almost completely disappearing, casting faint watery shadows, then become solid, mysterious, unfamiliar, extraordinary once more.

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