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# THE EPHEMERAL THREAD OF *MUJŌKAN* AND AWARE

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All that is good is fleeting:
a pale moon behind a shroud of mist,
a ripple in a still pond
that cannot hold its shape.
Justice whispers and vanishes;
kindness, a brief bloom,
falls to the ground with a sigh of petals.

They say this is the way of the world—
that impermanence is beauty,
that fragility is grace.
But why, then, does it ache?
Why does the soul break
against the banality of shadows,
the relentless tide of things that stay?

Evil persists,
not like the cherry blossom,
but like moss upon forgotten stone—
patient, unyielding, thriving in cracks.
It endures not for its strength,
but because it asks nothing of the wind.

And yet, I, too, am called fleeting.
To speak of justice is to be dismissed
as a dreamer—
as if care is arrogance,
as if knowing the weight of the world
is to deserve its scorn.

What wounds most is not the fall
of democracy, kindness, or beauty.
It is the silence of those we call friends,
their eyes turned to safer horizons,
their words like distant echoes,
falling before they reach the heart.

Still, the seasons turn.
And though spring may return,
its blossoms will not soothe this bitterness.

To see beauty in impermanence
is to also feel its cut,
the way it carves absence
into the air we breathe.
Perhaps this is the only truth:
not that justice is an illusion,
but that it exists only briefly,
fragile as the reflection on water.
Not that kindness is a lie,
but that it lives only in moments
too small to grasp.

And yet, there is a quiet dignity
in witnessing the world fall apart,
in naming what is lost
without turning away.
For to turn away
is to deny the aching beauty
of the transient,
the sharp, fleeting grace
of all we will never hold.

If evil persists,
let it persist.
But I will not call it eternal,
nor mistake its banality for power.
Instead, I will bow to the impermanence of all else—
the tender, fleeting truths
that rise and fall like breath.

For in the end, it is not hope that remains,
but the awareness of impermanence itself:
a thread unraveling in the wind,
a single petal drifting toward the earth,
its beauty complete
because it was never meant to stay.

## Notes

**1.** *Mono no aware* is a Japanese aesthetic concept that refers to an awareness of the impermanence of things, accompanied by a gentle, melancholic appreciation of their fleeting beauty. Often associated with the ephemeral nature of cherry blossoms, it encapsulates a sensitivity to the transience of life and a deep emotional response to its passing. *Mujōkan*, closely related, is the sentiment of impermanence itself—a recognition of the constant flow and change of existence. Rooted in Buddhist philosophy, it emphasizes the inevitability of decay, loss, and transformation, not as a cause for despair, but as an intrinsic part of life's beauty and truth. Together, these ideas invite a reflective acceptance of life's fleeting nature, finding meaning in the transient and embracing the sorrow and beauty of impermanence as inseparable elements of existence.

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

By Dorothy Heard
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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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# NAVIGATING IDENTITY AND BELONGING
## REFLECTING ON MY STUDY ABROAD EXPERIENCE IN BELIZE

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I've always believed in the power of learning—not just in classrooms, but through lived experience. As a nearly 60-year-old PhD student with a background in education and a deep love for biodiversity, I didn't think twice when the opportunity to study abroad in Belize appeared when a fellow classmate serving as an undergrad instructor of record cajoled me to give it a try. What I didn't fully anticipate was how this journey would challenge and reshape my sense of self, both as a learner and as a person navigating identity, age, and belonging in unfamiliar territory.

This reflection is more than a travel story. It's a candid exploration of what it means to be a mature student immersed in a group of mostly undergraduate peers, learning side by side in the vibrant landscapes of Belize. Along the way, I was pushed—physically, intellectually, and emotionally—to rethink what aging looks like, what learning can feel like, and where I fit within the broader concept of global citizenship. Through moments of challenge, connection, and quiet contemplation, this experience became not just about tropical ecology, but about reclaiming and reimagining my place in the world.

Belize has always been a bucket list trip. Dive magazines showed the colorful brilliance of the barrier reef and the fish that occupied it with a spectacular flourish. When I (a 60-year-old PhD student with two newly replaced knees) was presented the opportunity to participate in a Tropical Ecology study abroad course in Belize, I didn't hesitate to join. My love for plants and biodiversity outweighed any physical challenges that may have factored into my decision to participate. I checked my familial and domestic responsibilities at the gate as I boarded a United Airlines flight on January 2, 2025, to spend the next 16 days in the tropics.

As I landed, there was still no glimpse of what lay ahead. I was eager to jump in and explore both my wanderlust and nature. As I waited patiently in the 40-minute Belize Customs line, I joked, listened, and engaged with my fellow travelers. Many had traveled to Belize before and were frequent visitors or were returning to their second home. I was fascinated by their love for the culture, people, and place they had found in Belize. Interestingly, it didn't escape me that I was in a line of hundreds, yet I was the only person of color except for the Belizeans who worked for the airport, Customs, or security. The frequent questions I had about my shirt which read, "Study Abroad" and "USM," revealed a lot. Not one person surmised I was a student! The assumption was that I worked for the University.

This was the first of many instances on this trip in which I would be made aware that my status as a mature student was somewhat unusual. From a social construction perspective, my identity as a student was continuously shaped and reshaped by the social context and the perceptions of others. I found myself at times wanting to say I was a professor because "student" didn't quite fit the identity I had carved for four decades. This illustrates how identity is not static but influenced by societal norms and expectations regarding age and roles (Gergen & Gergen, 2001; Gubrium & Holstein, 2003).

Sure, it was easy to say I was a student of life or that I am constantly learning as an educator, but I had a full-time job when those words easily slid from my lips. Now, when I said I was a

student, my pride in leaving everything to pursue a PhD was mixed with the angst of, "Oh God, I'm a student!" The mixture of people's perceptions slid from awe, "You're brave," to disgust, "Why would any grown woman go back for that punishment?" From a social representation perspective, these reactions highlighted the collective beliefs and attitudes towards aging and education, showing how these societal narratives influence individual experiences and self-perception (Romaioli & Contarello, 2021). Mature students' counter-narratives to the construction of aging as decline defined these negative collective perceptions and beliefs as studying and learning as a privilege of youth (Romaioli & Contarello, 2021).

I'm rarely speechless, but standing there in that line, I didn't know what to say to the comments, as for the first time, I was equally sliding from sure to unsure during those 40 minutes. This is where the story begins, reflecting on how this experience affected my sense of identity, belonging, and global citizenship. The narrative of my journey, both internal and external, became a powerful tool for making sense of my experience, aligning with a narrative perspective. Through storytelling, I began to construct meaning from my experiences, weaving together my identity as a student, a mature learner, and a global citizen.

As I slung a duffle bag on my back and a backpack on the front, I walked to the baggage area; my ride was waiting for me on the other side, and I was excited. The whisper of my age had wormed its way into my consciousness, and now it had settled like an uneasy itch that I couldn't scratch. Was my very existence as a student challenging notions of ageism? Has society changed enough that my slight eye wrinkles and graying temples offer a new paradigm of what aging looks like? Am I ready for the 4-mile hikes through the rainforest? Or the hours of snorkeling along the Belize Barrier Reef? Like the fungus Cordyceps, which grows parasitically on organisms, the idea that my age might hinder me from keeping up with my 20-something peers began to take root. Just as Cordyceps overtakes and ultimately kills its host, would I allow society's perceptions of age—intellectually and physically—to control me, becoming a dream killer? Was I succumbing to the mainstream notion that mature individuals are less capable than their younger peers? I'm shocked at myself for even entertaining the thought.

On the long drive to the first stop, the Tropical Education Center, I encountered the first of many thought-provoking moments on the trip. As I was introduced to one of the Center's caretakers, I was asked if I was one of the professors. "No, I'm a student," I replied, followed by an uncomfortable silence and a nervous laugh from the worker. This interaction further underscored the tension between societal expectations and personal identity, highlighting the ongoing negotiation of self in a context where age, role, and perception intersect.

## ROOMING EXPECTATIONS

The only apprehension I had coming into the trip was living arrangements. Rooming with an 18–22-year-old who wasn't my child did leave me feeling a little, well, weird. I go to sleep early and get up frequently throughout the night. Will that disturb someone? My one apprehension meant nothing the entire trip, I'm happy to say. Is that because I found solace with my headphones on, and my bunkmates slept like a log when I had to don my headlamp, creep out, unlock the door, open the squeaky screen door, and cross the porch to the end of the hall to the group bathroom with no nighttime lights or hot water? But, hey, I was in Belize.

Research on intergenerational living arrangements suggests that older adults often express concerns about compatibility with younger individuals due to differences in routines, habits, and

lifestyle preferences (Cabib et al., 2022). However, studies have also shown that such arrangements can lead to positive outcomes when common interests and mutual respect are fostered (Scharlach et al., 2013). This seemed to hold true in my case, as the rest of my stay was with another younger mature student, 20 years my junior. We found solace in maturity, nature, and shared life experiences, bridging the generational gap through our shared connection to the environment and similar life stages. This underscores the importance of shared values and experiences in fostering meaningful intergenerational relationships, aligning with research indicating that such connections can enhance well-being and social integration for older adults (Scharlach et al., 2013).

The living arrangements may have been my only apprehension going into the Belize Study Abroad program, but it was evident my focus was education, where some of my younger peers thought of the learning as an inconvenience. My advanced academic background deeply shaped my approach to the experience, aligning with principles from adult learning theories such as andragogy. According to the theory of andragogy (Knowles et al., 1998), adult learners are self-directed, motivated by internal factors, and bring a wealth of personal experience to the learning process. I wanted to absorb everything the instructors, rangers, guides, and other students were teaching, driven by a desire for personal and professional growth. I approached each activity with intentionality, eager to explore and experience the environment slowly and methodically, reflecting a mature learner's goal-oriented and experiential approach.

In contrast, many of my undergraduate peers, possibly influenced by their developmental stage as described by Perry's (1999) theory of intellectual and ethical development, seemed more focused on the social aspects of the trip. Their learning experience appeared more exploratory and less structured, often engaging in social interactions and recreational activities like playing music during hikes and birding sessions. This contrast highlights the various stages of cognitive and emotional development. Perry's theory suggests that younger students often view knowledge as dualistic—right or wrong—while more mature learners tend to appreciate the complexity and relativity of knowledge, seeking deeper understanding and integration. My approach veered towards eco-pedagogy as the spirituality of nature and ruins was felt within, and I welcomed the solitude in many places.

This divergence in focus could be attributed to the differing life stages and educational priorities. As an adult learner nearing the completion of my PhD, I viewed this opportunity as a critical component of my academic and professional trajectory, with a finite number of working years remaining. My younger peers, on the other hand, likely saw this as one of many formative experiences in their academic journeys, with a longer career horizon ahead. This aligns with Erikson's (1950) stages of psychosocial development, where I am in the stage of generativity versus stagnation, focusing on leaving a legacy and achieving long-term goals, while my younger peers are navigating identity versus role confusion, exploring who they are and their place in the world (Orenstein & Lewis, 2022). This could be seen in our mandatory daily journal entries as my thoughts and experiences were carefully crafted for me to remember my emotions, learning, and situations that I thoughtfully entered daily while my peers would go days without entries and play catch up on the bus heading to new destinations.

This multifaceted contrast between my approach and that of my undergraduate peers underscores the impact of age, life stage, and educational intent on the study abroad experience, shaping not only how we engaged with the environment but also how we internalized and valued the learning process. While walking with my professor on one of the difficult hikes where I was

unable to keep up with my peers, I remarked to him that it would be great to have a study abroad experience with peers my age because I could find similarities in mind, effect, intent, and speed.

## PERSONAL IDENTITY GROWTH

My time in Belize was transformative, offering both subtle and profound shifts in my identity. The cultural immersion forced me to confront and reconsider aspects of who I am, my place in the world, and how I relate to others.

One of the most significant changes was a deeper appreciation for community and interconnectedness. Belizean culture, with its emphasis on communal living, shared experiences, and a close relationship with nature highlighted the importance of living in harmony with others and the environment. It was a unique experience seeing cultures living and breathing their heritage— the Maya at Maya Centre, the Garifuna of Stann Creek, and the Kriol at Gales Point Manatee. This was a stark contrast to the more individualistic culture I was accustomed to in the States, where neighbors rarely say hello. I found myself embracing these communal values, which reaffirmed my commitment to fostering more meaningful relationships and living more sustainably back home.

Additionally, navigating my identity as a mature student in a group predominantly composed of younger individuals challenged my preconceived notions about age and capability. Initially, I was self-conscious about being older, wondering if I could keep up physically and intellectually. However, as the days progressed, I realized that my age and life experiences were assets, not liabilities. At times, the terrain, mud, and climbing in and out of swaying boats slowed me, but it didn't affect my identity in a negative way much. Instead, it reassured me that, although my balance and endurance had seen better days as a Division 1 track athlete, I could still climb steadily and push myself beyond any limits I had imposed after the multiple knee surgeries and added weight. I became more confident in my abilities, both physically and intellectually, to contribute uniquely to the group, providing a perspective rooted in years of personal and professional growth. This reaffirmed my belief in lifelong learning and the value of diverse experiences in educational settings.

The cultural immersion also led to a stronger sense of global citizenship. Engaging with local communities, understanding their challenges, and witnessing their resilience broadened my worldview. I felt a stronger connection to global issues and a renewed commitment to advocating for environmental sustainability and social justice, both in my personal life and academic pursuits. As an educator by trade and spirit, every day fascinated me as I wondered and thought about how I could bring to life what I was experiencing—the Maya cities of Cahal Pech and Xunantunich, the Belize Barrier Reef off of Belize City and Stann Creek and preserves like the Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary, Jaguar Reserve Nature Center, St. Herman's Blue Hole National Park, and Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary—to children around the world.

In essence, the experience in Belize not only enriched my understanding of the world but also led to a reaffirmation of my values and a redefinition of my identity. It reinforced my belief in the power of education, the importance of community, and the potential for growth at any stage of life. This journey was a reminder that personal identity is fluid and continuously shaped by our experiences and interactions with the world around us.

## Group Dynamics: Moments of Connection and Isolation

Throughout the trip, navigating group dynamics with undergraduate students was a nuanced experience, filled with both moments of connection and instances of isolation. Initially, I felt a natural separation due to the age difference and divergent life stages. Their energetic chatter and casual approach to the experience often contrasted with my more reflective and purposeful engagement. This sometimes led to feelings of isolation, particularly during social gatherings where their conversations revolved around topics that felt distant from my current life stage. It was as if I were sitting at a table with my adult children, but I had no familial connection, just a shared experience.

However, moments of connection emerged as we spent more time together. Shared experiences, such as long hikes, snorkeling trips, and group discussions, served as equalizers. Conversations about the beauty of the Belizean landscape, the challenges of fieldwork, and the shared awe of our surroundings created common ground. These interactions fostered a sense of camaraderie that transcended age. I found that my willingness to listen and share stories from my own life resonated with some of the students, leading to meaningful exchanges and mutual respect, and by the end of the course, yes, a few started calling me Ms. Sandy.

## Cultural Integration: Sense of Belonging in the Belizean Community

My sense of belonging within the Belizean community fluctuated throughout the trip. Certain experiences made me feel warmly included, like drumming and dancing with Kriol Belizeans at Manatee Lodge, while others highlighted my status as an outsider. The full moon traditional music night made me feel a deep connection to the people and their way of life. The openness and hospitality of the Belizeans were palpable, making these moments feel genuine and inclusive.

Conversely, there were times when cultural and racial differences created a subtle barrier. Being the only person of color among the group of travelers and not Belizean occasionally led to moments of feeling othered. I was often mistaken for a Belizean, which led to a conflicting sense of identity, knowing they felt a sense of camaraderie with me but also feeling the disappointment when I shared that I was not. While Belizeans were welcoming, the occasional curiosity or assumption about my role—whether I was a professor, parent, or a local—underscored a sense of being different.

These experiences significantly contributed to my understanding of belonging in a new cultural context. They highlighted the complexity of integrating into a community as both a visitor and a learner. The moments of inclusion deepened my appreciation for the richness of Belizean culture and the importance of openness and adaptability. The instances of feeling excluded, however minor, offered valuable insights into the challenges faced by those navigating cross-cultural environments. They reminded me of the importance of empathy and the need to actively seek common ground while honoring cultural differences.

Overall, these dynamics enriched my understanding of belonging as a fluid concept, influenced by both internal perceptions and external interactions. They reinforced the idea that true belonging requires a balance of self-awareness, respect for others, and a willingness to engage openly with the unfamiliar.

## Cultural Awareness and Responsibility: Expanding Global Perspective

The Belize trip profoundly expanded my global perspective, particularly regarding environmental sustainability, social justice, and cultural preservation. Immersed in Belize's rich biodiversity and vibrant culture, I gained firsthand insights into the delicate balance between human activities and ecological preservation. The guided hikes through rainforests and explorations of the Belize Barrier Reef emphasized the urgent need for sustainable practices to protect these fragile ecosystem—from eliminating the plastics littered along the beaches brought in from the Caribbean tide to embracing the one-room homes with laundry hung out to dry to save the energy that would have been needed to power washers and dryers. What struck me in this context was how hard it is for Belizeans to receive goods from outside of the country, but how easy it is to receive all of the trash. Conversations with local guides and community members underscored the interconnection between environmental health and the well-being of local populations, highlighting the impact of climate change and deforestation on their livelihoods.

Social justice became a prominent theme during interactions with the Belizean community. Observing the efforts to preserve cultural heritage amidst modernization revealed the importance of maintaining cultural identity in the face of global pressures, fighting for their right to be seen as viable cultures in a world so full of fear of others. The resilience and pride of the Belizean people in their traditions, despite economic and environmental challenges, offered valuable lessons in cultural preservation and social equity.

## Contributions to Global Citizenship

As a mature PhD student, my identity significantly shaped my contributions to discussions and activities related to global citizenship. My life experiences and academic background allowed me to approach these discussions with a depth of perspective and a focus on long-term implications. In group dialogues, I often framed global issues within broader historical, social, and environmental contexts, encouraging others to think critically about the interconnectedness of global challenges.

My participation was not just about learning but also about fostering dialogue and encouraging my younger peers to consider their roles as global citizens. I shared insights from my personal and professional experiences, as well as academic studies, linking them to the real-world issues we observed in Belize, like no heated water for showers, toilet paper needing to be placed in the trash can versus the toilet, and rationed meals, and sharing areas in the U.S. without indoor plumbing or clean water and families with significant food insecurity. This helped bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, fostering a collaborative learning environment where all voices, regardless of age, were valued.

## Future Implications: Influencing Academic and Professional Pursuits

This experience will undoubtedly influence my future academic and professional pursuits by deepening my commitment to global engagement. It reinforced the importance of integrating global perspectives into my research, particularly in areas related to environmental sustainability and social justice. I plan to incorporate more international case studies and cross-cultural

comparisons into my work, using Belize as a model for how local actions can have global implications.

Professionally, the trip has inspired me to seek opportunities that involve international collaboration and community engagement. Whether through research, teaching, or outreach, I aim to contribute to global efforts that promote sustainability, equity, and cultural preservation. The trip also reminded me of the power of experiential learning and the importance of stepping outside one's comfort zone to gain new perspectives—a lesson I will carry forward in both my academic and personal growth endeavors.

Ultimately, this experience has strengthened my resolve to be an advocate for global citizenship, fostering a sense of responsibility and action that transcends borders and unites diverse communities in the pursuit of a sustainable and just world.

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# 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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# STREAM OF SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS

By Stacy Johnson
*An Eagle's Wing Academic Support Services*

Ebb and flow through conscious sub-conscious
Resisting, relenting to waves of transparency, authenticity
Submerging beyond the dialogical shallows
Descend into the deep
Awaken current!

a moment
a song
a dance
a story
being
becoming
us

**me**

What is the river but source and mouth
Transcending the autobiographical infinite
Molecules without beginning, without ending?

the moment
being becoming
the song the dance
**me** us
the story

Channel what IS within

The existential course across space, and place
Carving, shaping, disrupting, oppressing the social tide
Reflecting, interrogating, what IS

Who am I?
Who will we be? Who were we?
Who was I? Who will I be?
Who are we?

Let surge and tow, turbulence and maelstrom,
Convict the internal debris
Those dialectical realities
That illuminate our backwatered humanity
And Surface, understanding

who **I** am
who we are
who I will be
who we will be
who I was
who we were

# SACRED LANGUAGE(S) OF THE PAST
## ANCESTRAL LINGUISTIC GENOCIDE, THE ART OF LOSS, NECRO-TRAGEDY, AND THE PROCESS OF KNOWING

By Asad Ikemba
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Language can truly be considered spiritual and, in some respects, a scientific phenomenon. Empirically quantifiable phenomena occur as a result of cognitive intentions and processes that emanate from our volition, or spirit (e.Soul, 2024). Language is the connector of all things, configuring universal understanding and meaning. Beyond the surface, the languages that were born across cultures, time periods, and geographical locations are a window into the world view of that particular group navigating time and space. Further, the very languages we speak are directly synthesized with our spiritual beings, which possess the stories, traumas, victories, and knowledge of the past—or become the bearer of ontological and epistemological terror (Warren, 2018). But what of those whose languages were erased and subjected to an early and brutal death? Are their stories and histories forgotten? Are their legacies worth remembering?

Using an historical analysis of *ancestral linguistic genocide*, I aim to answer these critical questions; this has forced me to better conceptualize the *art of loss* of language through racial violence and terror, which produces physical and metaphorical death. Further, this historical analysis is a quintessential example of what Harris (2018) classified as *necro-being*, entrapped in *necro-tragedy*—a condition and institution of racism that kills and prevents persons from being born and surfaces as absolute, irredeemable suffering in a non-moral universe. As I reflect on my story, I deem the linguistic genocide of my people as a form of necro-tragedy. Through this lens, I acknowledge the African lineages who died at sea during the Middle Passage who never got to pass down their ancestral languages and those African ancestors who survived only to face death, brutality, and dehumanization in the processes of being forced to bury their own languages while adopting the English language.

Furthermore, my understanding of the art of loss, ancestral linguistic genocide, and the irredeemable suffering it has caused has better informed me of my destiny, scholarship, and life's work; all of which are carried out by my current commitment to the acquisition of my ancestral language(s). To that end, my ability to conceptualize these realities has produced a level of ingenuity within myself that allows me to imagine what future exists in this non-moral universe for children who share my story and deserve to reclaim the language(s) of their ancestors through culturally responsive language education and curriculum. I begin this story by exploring my ancestral discovery and its connection to the religion of Islam and the Qur'anic Arabic language.

### THE ART OF LOSS, QUR'ANIC ARABIC, AND THE ROOT OF RELIGIOUS LINGUISTIC REDEMPTION

The nature of my experiences in and beyond the classroom are engulfed in the process of loss and losing. As my passion in linguistics has become one of the greatest parts of my identity

and research, I can't help but reflect upon and grieve the ways in which my ancestral languages were lost. In the African American context, I define *ancestral linguistic genocide* during the trans-Atlantic slave trade as the systematic eradication of African languages and linguistic identities through forced displacement, prohibition of mother tongue use, and cultural assimilation policies enacted by colonial powers. This process severed African peoples from their ancestral languages as a means to control, erase, and reconstruct identity within the chattel-slavery system. With this understanding, I must admit, my journey has been pretty difficult considering the deep trauma embedded in knowing my ancestors were victims of this tragedy. In Poetter's (2024) *Curriculum Fragments*, he articulated a powerful statement, "We all repress things that are uncomfortable, bury them, keep them hidden, just to be well and to survive" (p. 50). Thinking about my ancestral story brings me terror, grief, and discomfort, and although it's a fragment of a more distant past, it had been a part of my identity that remained repressed for years and became unsettling from within. This realization led to the inspiration to create my own independent educational experience that brought me to the question, "Who am I?"

## WHO AM I?

After years researching my lineage, I discovered that I descended from the Hausa tribe from northern Cameroon in Central Africa. This discovery indicated that my ancestors were Muslim and typically had advanced Arabic literacy skills. Similar to Poetter's (2024) fascination with the American Civil War, I became fascinated with my ancestral languages and the idea of truly knowing who I am beyond the cage of America's doings. I mean, wow, how did this young African American boy who grew up in Cincinnati, Ohio, in America discover such a distant, underrepresented, complex, yet rich historical past? Between 10 and 30% of enslaved Africans were Muslims and came from communities that were native Arabic speakers; this percentage could be significantly higher due to the undocumented forced conversion of enslaved Africans to Christianity as a part of the trans-Atlantic slave trade (Diouf, 2013). This was a part of who I am, this was my legacy. Learning this blew my mind and made me further reflect on why I was naturally drawn to Islam in the pursuit of Arabic language acquisition through studying the Qur'an. I guess it was all starting to make sense. In true Asad fashion, it was time to learn a new language—not any language, but a language that has a significant religious and cultural connection to me by way of my ancestral heritage. This brought me to the next question, "What is my process of knowing?"

## THE PROCESS OF KNOWING

Transitioning to the concept of knowing, I must be clear; numerous weeks passed without me actually knowing anything. I was geared up and ready to start Arabic classes with my teacher from Giza, Egypt. This was one of the most challenging educational experiences of my life and brought nerves and determination. I had the opportunity to relearn a part of cultural and linguistic heritage my ancestors lost centuries ago and pass these language skills down to my children one day. Although at the time I had a significant amount of Swahili language proficiency, the Arabic language was far beyond what a native English speaker could ever imagine. For context, Arabic is not a simple language, but a language that has over 12 million words compared to the approximate

170,000 English words (Eriksen Translations, 2022). To add more stress, it is a cursive language that reads from right to left. Simply put, one must completely rewire their brain in order to learn!

As I began classes, I began to hit milestones that I had never thought of. First, I learned and memorized the Arabic alphabet with vowel concepts and correct pronunciation. Second, I began to start putting together small words and phrases using the pronunciation rules. Third, I began to learn how to develop more complex sentences and even how to write my name—(Asad Ikemba) أسدإيكيمبا. Once I got to this level, it was like I hit a roadblock. I became discouraged and did not feel like I would ever reach my language goals. I began to develop deficit thoughts that sounded like:

> "Maybe I'll always be limited to the English language."
> "I'm not truly capable of this because I started learning a language as an adult."
> "Maybe my instructor laughs at me when we get offline."

I would say that reflecting too much on the past can create problems in the present and a future that never existed. These negative thoughts helped me realize that my deficit thinking was a sub-conscious emotion that haunted me as a result of necro-tragedy—which produced ancestral linguistic genocide. I was able to dig myself out of that dark space and continue my classes. I went on to complete all the foundational rules in the Arabic language, learning how to read, write, and recite the Qur'an, which gave me the ability to draw closer to *who I truly am* and *what I deserve to know*. In all, this educational experience has had a significant impact on my life in ways I couldn't have imagined. This regressive fragment showed me the power of self-determination and that true life education can be impactful in and beyond the walls of American institutions. I appreciate the vulnerability of Poetter's (2024) fragments, as they have helped me dig deeper and become more comfortable with facing the often-uncomfortable past. My ancestral story was a reality I had to face to achieve a life goal and further reclaim my ancestral linguistic heritage. This historical analysis of my ancestral history and its association with the Arabic language has inspired the revelation of my destiny, current scholarship, and life's work.

## INSPIRATION, AFRICAN LANGUAGES, AND THE REVELATION OF DESTINY – A MARATHON TO FLUENCY

Beyond the acquisition of Qur'anic Arabic, another part of my ancestral heritage is connected to sub-Saharan African languages. This revelation of my destiny was born through the inspiration to become a professor, linguist, and researcher, which I attribute to one of my African American heroes, Dr. Lorenzo Dow Turner. Dr. Turner was an African American linguist and academic who was most popularly known for his seminal research finding the linguistic connections between the Gullah Geechee Language in the communities in lower county Georgia (and the sea islands) and West African languages of ethnic groups from which African Americans descend. This research was presented in his magnum opus, *Africanism in the Gullah Dialect* (Turner, 1949). The first work of its kind, Turner's research played a huge role in the revitalization of African linguistic heritage in the African American community. Although traces of African language and phonetic patterns had been documented in African American speech, Dr. Turner helped solidify the Gullah dialect as an official creole language recognized on a global scale.

This pivotal moment in history helped disrupt the ideology that the Gullah language was "just another corrupted English" spoken by illiterate enslaved Africans. Because of the devastating aftermath of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, many descendants of enslaved Africans were disconnected from the reality that they descend from ethnic groups of diverse cultures and languages. With that reality in mind, Turner traveled to Africa and Brazil to continue his research on African languages and their influence on the diaspora during the early to mid-20th century before it became common for African Americans to travel and study abroad. Dr. Turner's research and legacy plays a huge role in my inspiration to further explore the African American connection to African languages beyond the Gullah Geechee communities. I see much of myself in him and aspire to grab the baton and continue the marathon of African American linguistic liberation.

I am also inspired by contemporary scholar Dr. April Baker-Bell and her award-winning book, *Linguistic Justice* (2020), which takes a sociolinguistic approach to advocating for education that acknowledges AAVE (African American Vernacular English), AAL (African American Language), and BL (Black Language) as legitimate, rule-governed languages spoken by African Americans. Further, this text critically draws on the liberatory outcomes of Black Language as a form of resistance to white linguistic hegemony that is present in both educational institutions and the society at large. However, outside of Dr. Turner, I haven't seen much literature on the theorization or praxis of African American track-to-fluency language education learning the languages of their African ancestors that typically derive from West African ethnic groups (e.g., Bambara, Fulfulde, Wolof, Mandinka) or of the broader African continent (e.g., Swahili, Xhosa, Zulu, Lingala). With that said, I am a strong believer that all African languages are equally important yet under researched in connection to the African American linguistic imagination.

## Current Scholarship and the Challenges Faced as a Survivor of Linguistic Genocide

I consider where I am now as an emerging scholar a gray area. Anyone who's ever decided to learn a new language (while pursuing a PhD) as an adult can attest to the challenges that arise in the acquisition process. I conceptualize this gray area as a crossroad between developing myself as a linguistic scholar and as a multilingual global citizen. I mean, isn't the PhD stressful enough! However, I strongly believe that my language acquisition journey is teaching me so much about what it means to be an African American African language learner. These lessons, while tough, are critical in developing my skills to effectively create language programs that will produce more multilingual African American children. Some of the lessons I've learned throughout this process are:

1. You cannot rely on anti-black institutions to undo linguistic genocide of enslaved Africans.
2. There is no easy route (or secret) to becoming fluent in a 2nd language. The language acquisition process is indeed a marathon, and if you are not committed to learning, chances are you won't reach fluency.
3. If you don't use it, you lose it! There is nothing more important than staying consistent speaking with native speakers. Sometimes having access to native speakers can be a barrier.
4. Language education is most critical in early childhood education due to the developmental years (0-5) being crucial in establishing a strong foundation in speaking, reading, and writing any language.

5. Language is one of the most incredible ways one can expand their horizons and understanding of the world as doing so introduces new concepts, ideas, and epistemologies that cannot be properly translated into the English language.

Beyond these lessons, I've come to the realization that, in order for me to be successful in my language acquisition journey, I cannot continue to have a deficit/victim mindset. I would often struggle because, amid me learning my African language of choice (Swahili), I am constantly reminded of the horrific ways in which my people lost their ancestral languages. This remembrance can cause one to become discouraged and paralyzed with trauma and doubt. Transitioning from a deficit mindset and reminding myself how blessed I am to even be given the inspiration to become multilingual is essential to my development. In addition, I must remember how far I've come in this marathon—from a young curious undergraduate student frustrated at the beginning stages, to a doctoral student who can hold conversations and navigate in East Africa through language while developing life-long friendships and connection with Swahili-speaking people.

These experiences are all necessary in order for me to reach my long-term goal, finish the marathon, then run it again and again with African American youth in years to come. I am certain that I will encounter more valuable lessons that will inform my research and life's work. Also, I am certain that those who paved the way for me to run this marathon, like Dr. Turner, would be proud that young emerging scholars like me are willing to grab the baton and expound on such important work like providing African language access to African American children. Last but certainly not least, I have begun to develop a progressive plan while exploring the disparities in U.S. foreign language education. I am a strong believer in the ideology that, where there is theory, there must be practice; where there is thought, there must be imagination; and where there is systemic racism, there must be counter-initiatives. Here's how I plan to implement that.

## IMAGINATION, COUNTER-INITIATIVE, AND THE MAKING OF THE AFRICAN LANGUAGE LAB

Have you ever wondered why so many American students graduate high school and college without actually learning a foreign language? How about why foreign languages are typically only an educational requirement starting in high school? Sometimes I wonder, why there is access to languages of white/European groups (French, German, Italian) while the languages of African/Indigenous groups are invisible. I also wonder why, if the American education system truly wanted to prepare American children to become global citizens through linguistics, foreign language requirements wouldn't be included in early childhood education (pre-k/Kindergarten) and beyond (high school to college). Or better yet, I wonder why American education does not offer the African languages of African Americans, who lost their language because of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Would it be too expensive to do such a thing? Would it mean we as a society have to acknowledge that this historical phenomenon occurred and classify it as a reality worth examining?

> According to research on U.S. foreign language education, a total of 11 states has foreign language graduation requirements; 16 states do not have foreign language graduation requirements; and 24 states have graduation requirements that may be fulfilled by several subjects—one of which is foreign languages. (American Councils, 2017, p. 6)

These statistics indicate that, from a policy perspective, the mastery of foreign languages is not prioritized or enforced as a critical part of the American educational experience. I would further add that, of those states that do have foreign language graduation requirements, the programs offered are consistently ineffective in their ability to develop multilingual students. This can largely be attributed to the reality that the tenants of white linguistic hegemony are embedded in the fabric of American education and curriculum.

Beyond the failure of America's foreign language education, I also argue that the access to and prioritization of African languages are even more rare. The American Councils for International Education's (2017) *National K-12 Foreign Language Enrollment Survey* shows that African language learning classes are nearly invisible and among the lowest percentages of all offered foreign language classes among participants in their national survey. I recognize this as a clear indicator of the level at which African language, culture, and history are valued in American schools.

These are the realities that are the foundation of my research through a progressive lens. As an African American man who lived through America's lackadaisical and inefficient foreign language track, I felt severely disconnected from foreign language education as I saw that the language options that were available had no historical or cultural connection to my community. In addition, I felt as though the foreign language education did nothing but remind me of colonialism and imperialism that led to the linguistic genocide of African American people. In fact, I noticed that schools in my home district CPS (Cincinnati Public Schools) even offered dead languages such as *Latin* at a higher rate than African languages.

Let's take a moment to conceptualize the gravity of surviving a linguistic genocide and the importance of acknowledging the gravity of why culturally relevant language education is necessary. To understand linguistic genocide, one must see the language of the oppressor as a weapon used to inflict physical, mental, and spiritual violence towards African people. This reconnects to the aforementioned philosophical concept of necro-being/tragedy that results in death and perpetual suffering. A group travelled to Africa, committed one of the worst and long-lasting human trafficking campaigns in human history, facilitated cultural and linguistic genocide forcing millions of enslaved Africans to abandon their indigenous languages, and has done nothing to create avenues for the descendants of the enslaved to reclaim what was lost during the trans-Atlantic slave trade through education. These questions, ideas, and thoughts led to the educational experience I imagine happening in the future that would require me to use educational leadership to fight against injustice in the American education system.

## Systemic Restoration of African Language and Multilingualism in the African American Context

My long-term goal after I finish my PhD is to start the *African Language Lab*, which will be a hub for African American early childhood learners (k-3) to receive access to track-to-fluency African language education. The African Language Lab, as a counter-initiative to white linguistic hegemony, will focus on African languages that derive from ethnic groups who share a common ancestral history with African Americans such as the Wolof, Fulfulde, Hausa, Soninke, and Bambara. As we develop, I hope to provide African language education in linguistic families that will allow African Americans to connect to other parts of the continent, such as Swahili, Zulu, and Xhosa.

Through this initiative, I also plan to create a pipeline for African language teachers to participate in a residency-style teaching fellowship in America or virtually at the Language Lab. Furthermore, I will start in k-3 due to the amount of research that suggests that language and literacy education in early childhood education has a positive effect on their developmental and cognitive abilities, in addition to providing a strong foundation in second language learning. I would also like to become a professor of educational leadership, linguistics, history, and/or early childhood education. I want to continue using my scholarship and teaching to inspire students of all backgrounds to understand the power of African language education.

As I imagine this future educational experience, I think of how Love (2023) articulated the importance of CRT (Critical Race Theory), which is also connected to research areas such as critical Black language studies. CRT in curriculum lies at the complex epicenter of education activism and education policy/reform. For example, following the cultural aftermath of Nikole Hannah-Jones' (2019) *The 1619 Project*, practitioners and community leaders continue to advocate for education that centers the Black experience and our contributions to American society through the lens of U.S. chattel slavery (Love, 2023). Much like the reactions to CRT, this project was met with friction by educational leaders and politicians who are complicit in the perpetuation of white hegemonic history education that ignores African Americans, much like the realities of American language education. I strongly believe that, if the history of a people is forgotten, then their linguistic heritage will be invisible.

I imagine that the Africa Language Lab will be an educational institution and counter-initiative that will resist the white linguistic hegemony and anti-black linguistic racism often demonstrated in American society, education, and curriculum (Baker-Bell, 2020). In this moment, I could become the educational leader I always needed as a child—an educational leader who isn't afraid to go against the grain or actively contribute to the decolonization of African American children, a leader who would acknowledge the intellectual curiosity of Black children who may desire to learn languages that are culturally relevant to their ancestral heritage. I imagine that this initiative may be viewed as radical; however, it could become a transformative possibility for children who otherwise would be invisible. The African Language Lab will be unique, because we will use African languages as a language of instruction. This means students will get an opportunity to be fully immersed in their target language through their teachers, curriculum, and classroom environments.

Although I aspire to make change regarding better access to African language education in American schools, I realize that sometimes educational resistance must occur outside of public institutions. This realization reminds me that those individuals or governing bodies mentioned in Love's (2023) work regarding the conflict of CRT in history education are the ones who also get to decide what languages are important and what languages aren't. To that end, they are complicit in devaluing and erasing the African linguistic heritage of Black children. I hope as an educational leader I can contribute to diversifying the American foreign language education experience for Black children whose linguistic heritage has been invisible in schools. Love's (2023) work addresses a holistic view of the injustices that Black children experience in education. I have been able to make connections between these areas of injustices and the matter of American foreign language education and my personal lived experiences. In all, this is how I seek to re-imagine the American foreign language education experience that dismantles a particular form of injustice regarding the linguistic heritage of African American children.

## CONCLUSION

The overall tenets of *currere* (regressive, analytical, progressive, synthetic) have gifted me with the skills to reflect on multiple possibilities regarding my life's educational experiences. As I conclude this piece, I'd like to revisit the original questions I aimed to address through synthesizing my linguistic history, current journey, and potential future. The questions were: (1) What of those whose languages were erased and subjected to an early and brutal death? (2) Are their stories and histories forgotten? (3) Are their legacies worth remembering? My linguistic journey has served as an example of self-decolonization, resisting the institutions of racism that have prevented the survival of my ancestors' language(s). As a counter to this necro-tragedy, I imagine that this linguistic journey promotes *life* over death, *joy* over terror, and a perpetual state of *bliss* over irredeemable suffering. My commitment to my Qur'anic Arabic and African language acquisition journey is in honor of those bloodlines lost at sea, the languages that never had an opportunity to be passed down, the millions of children who would have inherited those languages who were prevented from being born.

To acquire a language to fluency and provide opportunities for others to do the same is one of the strongest ways to preserve the legacy of a particular group of people. As for African Americans, learning the languages of their ancestors would restore a sense of remembrance that could revitalize a sense of self that has been missing for centuries. Unfortunately, racialized groups cannot depend on their oppressors to learn from the horrors of their complex historical past but rather must construct decisive ways to put the destiny of their descendants in their own hands. If you want to know someone's story, listen to the language they speak. It is usually either a story of domination or subjugation, and as for those whose ancestral languages have been violently eliminated, the most important part of their story has been missing in the book of humanity.

To address the last question, the idea of worth is subjective to the interpreter; however, the idea of legacy tends to be universally understood. In all, language can be a connector of both. I dream to find a way to restore both regarding African American ancestral language(s) through the forming of an education institution (African Language Lab) using my life experiences and history to develop a curriculum that will address the ancestral linguistic genocide, art of loss, and necro-tragedy faced by African Americans. This, I believe, is the ultimate indication of self-worth, that is, if language is truly universally recognized as a scientific and spiritual phenomenon.

All three reflections (regressive, analytical, progressive) in this piece have made me who I am. It has all been woven into the fabric of my psyche, spirit, and heart, which has supported my dedication to linguistics as a liberatory skill for African American children. I dream one day of walking in the African Language lab seeing Black children speaking the African languages of their ancestors. I dream of their spirits smiling above, acknowledging that their descendants were finally given an opportunity to remember who they are. I dream that through education and curriculum generations of multilingual African American children will grow up having an informed, spiritual sense of their ancestral story beyond the horrors of slavery. I too dream to see hundreds of thousands of multilingual African American children grow up to become contributing members of the global society connecting with others through languages they once had no access to. This is the nature of my destiny and a reflection of the sacred language(s) of the past.

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# THE SATIATED LIFE

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*Sankofa*, a Twi word from Ghana, literally means "to retrieve" or "go back and get it." Its conceptual significance finds purchase, for example, among African-Americans who seek to reconnect with their African ancestry (Asante, 2007). *Currere* (Pinar, 1994), more than any other academic concept I have encountered along my PhD journey, requires a constant practice of retrieval, analysis, and synthesis that steadies me during the vortex of final assignment submissions brought by the end of the semester. One retrieval in particular has me fixated these days—something profound I read in my very first class as a PhD student. We were assigned Lisa Delpit's (1995) seminal text, *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*, required reading for any student of education. In it, Delpit (1995) draws from the writings of Yup'ik anthropologist, teacher, and actor, Dr. Angayuqaq Oscar Kawagley, who distills the larger significance of education into the most exquisite terms: "The purpose of education is to learn to die satiated with life" (p. 107). Now forever embedded in my mind, I thought then that Kawagley, like Harrison Ford in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, was in possession of the holy grail itself—unembellished, stark, but life giving in every way.

On the surface, a definition laid plain and bare in this way might leave the reader with a macabre view of the pursuit of education. Yet just beneath this veneer lies a profound offering of a beginning—one so vast in its possibilities that any hint of the grim or morose is eclipsed. Delpit expands this vision of education, offering that schools must provide

> experiences that are so full of the wonder of life, so full of connectedness, so embedded in the context of our communities, so brilliant in the insights that we develop and the analyses that we devise, that all of us, teachers and students alike, can learn to live lives that leave us truly satisfied. (p. 104)

I think the concept of a "satiation with life" exists as a strong undercurrent of *currere*, suggesting that, while the true potential of education—enlightenment—may reveal itself in our final days, it is the pathways shaped by life's catalytic beginnings and the substance of the journeys beyond that make it truly transformative.

In this paper, I introduce a simple curricular framework centered on four essential and interconnected educational milestones that I believe are integral to living a full and meaningful life:

- Sensemaking and intellectualism
- Learning self-determination
- Understanding of self and place
- Cultivating a satiated life

Interwoven within this synthetical journey are autobiographical miniatures that explore these four elements. I begin with my own early quest for intellectualism and sensemaking in high

school. I then move to an imagined future curriculum that is chosen rather than imposed, delve into thoughts about environmental stewardship as a core educative goal, and conclude with a synthesis shaped by a deeply personal story—grappling with the recent passing of my grandfather John Bilal, I—a man whose very existence defied forces and pedagogies of oppression and whose self-determined life of knowledge-seeking propelled him to his own satiated end. Through this exploration, I aim to reveal the intertwined connections between *currere*, life's arc, and the educational journeys that continue to chisel away at me—human and educator alike.

## SENSEMAKING BEYOND THE BINARY (REGRESSIVE)

As an overachieving 15-year-old, my determination to excel academically and gain admission to top colleges was fierce and focused. I sought out an academic environment as challenging and enriching as my musical life, which, at the time, was the cornerstone of my education and identity. Seeking more balance between music and academics, I enrolled in the International Baccalaureate (IB) program at Suitland High School, less than two miles east of Washington, DC. While Suitland HS had a reputation for being "hood," it was equally well-known for its robust performing arts and IB programs. It felt like the perfect place to grow my ambitions in both music and academics.

During the IB program info meeting, Ms. Bridgbasi, the IB director, made it clear that the coursework was rigorous and would make our freshman year feel like a walk in the park. The juniors and seniors who spoke at the session did not warn us of IB Calculus, or IB Physics, no. Of all the classes, their starkest warnings came in reference to IB History, "Mr. James don't play!" one said as she chuckled nervously. "You'll be lucky to get a B in his class." Though I entered Mr. James's class expecting a challenge, I was ultimately unprepared for—and 30 years later I am still unpacking—the impact that classroom experience left on me.

We covered the full spectrum of topics one expects in Mr. James's IB history class: feudal Europe, the rise of the Catholic Church and the Crusades, the British monarchy and the Age of Enlightenment, colonial imperialism, the American Revolutionary and Civil Wars, the World Wars, the Cold War, and finally, the war in Iraq. I was all in—eager to dive into histories my father often spoke about at home but with the academic rigor of a college-level curriculum.

Mr. James was a jovial man, his demeanor as funny as his quirky appearance was unforgettable. His wispy gray hair was styled in a way that made me swear his barbershop was in Legoland. The front was cut blunt and perfectly straight, while the sides curved into a bowl-like shape just below his ears, creating the uncanny effect of a fluffy gray helmet on his head. He must have been a fan of Saturday Night Live because he often used these hilarious exaggerated voices (*a la* Steve Martin) in his lectures. One of his most memorable bits was this hilarious "good/bad" refrain he used to simplify complex historical topics like war, oppression, or conflict. With a goat-like inflection, he'd bleat, "Feudal Lords? B-a-a-a-d!" before switching to a cheery baritone chirp, "Peasants and serfs? Good!" It became this recurring thing: "Slavery? B-a-a-a-d! Freedom? Good!" or "Third Reich? B-a-a-a-d! End of WWII? Good!" His comedic timing and helmet hair cut turned history lectures into ones that remain memorable to this day.

As the child of a former Black nationalist, though, I had been immersed in what was then called Afrocentric education—a powerful and much needed supplement to the systemic narrative gaps in my formal schooling (Asante, 2007). My Dad took his job to supplement my learning seriously, and in so doing, he illuminated the histories and contributions of Black people beyond

the narrow narrative of enslavement by celebrating the richness, brilliance, and beauty of our culture that he knew would be absent from the white-dominated hidden curriculum (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). Against this backdrop, and looking for nuance and complexity, Mr. James's humor and overly simplified "good/bad" binary grew tiresome after a while. Whether due to the constraints of our 45-minute class periods—forcing him to cover an impossibly vast amount of historical terrain—or an unspoken assumption that historical complexity and nuance needed to be "dumbed down" for a classroom of Black students (a thought that still makes me wince), the reductive binaries in his lessons often erased the depth and power dynamics that my father discussed with me and my siblings at home.

For our final assignment, we wrote papers about the Industrial Revolution. I was thrilled because, in our home, the boon of wealth America acquired due to the exploitation of free labor was frequently a topic of conversation. Dad's own refrain still echoes in my mind, "This whole nation was built on our backs," he'd say, gesturing with a broad sweep of his hand. Equipped with this knowledge, I crafted a thesis that challenged me: "The free labor of enslaved Africans enabled America to amass immense wealth, which financed the Industrial Revolution, creating new forms of wealth that America continues to benefit from." My goal was to weave together the lessons I had absorbed at home with the concepts I was learning in school, sensemaking and deepening my understanding of economic systems and power dynamics. In the paper, I cited examples of labor exploitation during the industrial age, framed capitalism as an economic system that was dependent on the subjugation of an underclass, and connected these systems to the enduring legacy of American chattel slavery.

While Mr. James acknowledged the strength of my analysis on industrial exploitation and capitalism, he outright rejected my connection to slavery. Despite the robust primary and secondary sources I drew from—courtesy of my mother's unlimited access to the Library of Congress as an employee—his red-inked comment in the margins is as clear in my mind today as it was all those years ago, "There is no evidence that slavery and the Industrial Revolution are linked." I was incredulous. Given his approach to history—rote facts and oversimplified binaries—it should not have surprised me when he dismissed my well-supported argument. Reflecting on this today, I realize this was my first conscious encounter with the hidden curriculum—how academic gatekeeping authority could erase well supported connections and enforce narrow narratives, limiting students in their intellectualism and meaning-making pursuits.

He gave me a "B," with no explanation beyond his rejection of my thesis. Though I'd long been warned about Mr. James's tough grading, what hurt me—crushed me even—was the feeling of intellectual dismissal. So determined was I to change his mind, I got my parents involved, and he agreed to meet at his home in Glen Arden, Maryland. He and his wife were the caretakers at Monteith Mansion, a former tobacco plantation and historical site. This irony, even then, was not lost on me. I argued my case, walked him through my sources, and pointed out the gaps his curt response failed to acknowledge. There we sat for 10 minutes as he reread my paper, but he was unrelenting. Even in that moment, when he could have guided me toward stronger sources or more compelling evidence, he chose not to. Instead, he closed the door on what could have been a welcome and meaningful exchange of ideas.

I have to wonder about his pedagogical mettle as he approached the end of a long high school teaching career. Was he just dialing it in? Had he become inured to critical engagement from his students after decades of teaching the same content? Regardless of the reasons, some 30 years hence, Mr. James's most profound and enduring lessons were not delivered during his lectures but long after our last conversation on those plantation grounds: meaning-making in

education is often arbitrated and refracted by a dominant, white lens (Bell, 1992). Suggesting that the nation's post-Civil War economic leaps were linked to centuries of free labor was, for him, a step too far. The cynic inside me wonders how much his role as the preserver of a slaveholder's property left him incapable of conceding and engaging with this truth.

Reflecting now through the lens of Bettina Love's (2023) *Punished for Dreaming* and her exploration of erasure, I see that this moment was pivotal. It revealed the shadow side of curriculum and pedagogy but also ignited a resolve within me—to dig deeper, question the veneer of authority, and uncover truths that lie beneath dominant narratives (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Love, 2023). It was a transformative takeaway that continues to shape my approach to education and meaning-making.

## CURRICULUM THAT'S CHOSEN, NOT CONFERRED (PROGRESSIVE)

Few aspects of parenting bring me more joy than seeing the slow and steady self-actualizing of my children as they navigate their educational journeys. Cohen, my bonus boy, is near the top of his sophomore class at school. But he has really found his stride (and literally his voice) in musical theater, where his vocal teacher Mr. Seale is helping him develop a rich and warm baby baritone. He has taken to the American Song Book, and though he loves Tyler the Creator, every now and again, he will croon out to Oscar Hammerstein and Irving Berlin. "This boy is going to be the next Thomas Hampson or Bryn Terfel," I think to myself. A step-momma can dream, right?

My daughter, Araba, is thriving academically at the Cincinnati Waldorf School, where my ex-husband and I enrolled her 11 years ago at the age of 2 after hearing their now-famous WVXU ad tagline: "The Cincinnati Waldorf School—Where education is a journey, not a race." And what a journey it has been. Her early years at Waldorf were magical: naturally lit classrooms decorated with cascading pastel-dyed silks, hand-carved wooden toys, and a focus on developmentally appropriate, child-centered learning (Oberman, 2008a, 2008b). These and other "Waldorf-isms" have become family norms—hikes in the rain, limited screen time, and a reverence for experiential learning.

Now a seventh grader, Araba continues to reap the benefits of her Waldorf education. She creates her own textbooks alongside her classmates, filling them with original art, writing, and projects that reflect their understanding. This constructivist approach allows students to actively build their knowledge, going beyond rote memorization to engage deeply with their learning (Jonassen, 1991). Waldorf education also emphasizes a strengths-based approach, where teachers honor each student's unique talents and encourage them to take on new challenges from a place of confidence and self-assuredness (Easton, 1997; Oberman, 2008a, 2008b). As one Waldorf educator noted, "A Waldorf classroom seeks to create a safe space where students' strengths are honored, allowing them to venture into areas of difficulty with a sense of self-worth." Though I've wrestled hard with the Waldorf curriculum's Euro-centric underpinnings and its perfunctory efforts to evolve toward a more culturally responsive approach, I am able to overlook these shortcomings because of the work I do, like my father did when I was a child, to supplement Araba's curriculum (Oberman, 2008a, 2008b). Our summers in Accra, Ghana, her deep connection with the music, Fante language, and ancestral village, reassure me that she will have the required cultural grounding to know herself.

Just a few weeks ago, Araba became ill with a throat infection. My child cried—not from the discomfort of her worsening pain but from the realization that she would miss the first two days of her much-anticipated anatomy block. At Waldorf, learning happens in immersive, thematic blocks, and her teacher, Ms. Harwood, had previewed the year's topics early on (Easton, 1997). For my kiddo, anatomy was *the* block she anticipated most. Since September, there wasn't one week that went by that Araba didn't talk about the anatomy block. She hilariously put the kibosh on plans we had to visit family in Houston: "Oh no, Momma. We can't go to Houston in November. That'll be when the anatomy block starts."

This hilarious moment (where my 13-year-old was sho-nuff trying to plan our lives around her content block) had larger significance: by enabling Araba to engage with what excites her most, Waldorf fosters self-determination and agency, where love for learning arises naturally through inquiry and discovery rather than being conferred.

When Araba returned to school, she hopped into the car beaming. "So, how was anatomy?" I asked. "Oh, it was SO good!" she exclaimed, launching into a mile-a-minute explanation of everything she'd learned and her excitement for creating her "Main Lesson book"—a handcrafted textbook Waldorf students create for each block, filled with their own artwork. Seeing her fulfillment, curiosity, and anticipation, I couldn't help but wish this experience for every student.

Organizations like EL Education (formerly Expeditionary Learning) adopt similar progressive practices, allowing students to take ownership of their learning. For example, students in EL Education schools prepare for student-led parent-teacher conferences by analyzing their own data and setting improvement goals, mirroring the self-assessment practices seen in Waldorf classrooms (Levy, 2015). These approaches show how curriculum that's chosen—not conferred—cultivates lifelong learners who embrace challenges with confidence and curiosity.

An excerpt from the poem fable "On Children" written by 20th century poet Khalil Gibran provides a powerful conceptual and philosophical basis for what I imagine an effective and irresistible curriculum might look like. In the poem, Gibran reflects on the nature of children "coming through you but not of you," reminding parents and educators alike of the natural independence and self-determination of young minds. He writes:

> You may give them your love, but not your thoughts. …
> You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you.
> For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.
> You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth.
> The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite, and He bends you with His might that His arrows may go swift and far.
> Let your bending in the archer's hand be for gladness;
> For even as He loves the arrow that flies, so He loves also the bow that is Stable.
> (Gibran, 1923)

This elegant and striking prose reminds us that children—and students, by extension—are unique unto themselves. Though we can facilitate and guide their learning from our experiential lenses, ultimately, to expand Gibran's analogy, the arrow's trajectory is determined less by the archer's precise, controlled, and calculated aim but by the unique composition of the arrow itself: the grain of the wood, the feathers on the fletching, and the winds of change, life, and events that may take it off course and bring it back again.

In this sense, I imagine a curriculum that embodies this ethos—one that sets a student on a pathway to soaring but releases the bowstring with trust, knowing they will hit a target of their own making, not merely one that is forced upon them. It would be a curriculum rooted in possibility and agency, offering guidance but never imposing rigid direction, allowing each student to thrive on their terms, guided by curiosity and self-determination.

## KNOW SELF, KNOW PLACE (ANALYTICAL)

My curiosity about Kawagley grew after reading the quote in Delpit's (1995) book that left me stunned and enchanted. I searched and found a collection of his writings curated by the University of Alaska Fairbanks, offering me a richer and more textured sense of his ideas, all rooted in indigenous wisdom, and their practical pedagogical applications. A prominent theme among these volumes is balance and harmony with nature. In his (2001) piece, "Contaminants Have Found Us" he contrasts the sustainability practices of Yup'ik society—living in balance with nature, producing little waste, preserving ecological equilibrium—with practices that lie outside of that balance. In an earlier work "Earth, Air, Fire," Kawagley (1996) asserts that education that leaves out a profound respect and stewardship for the natural world is incomplete. Kawagley positions this assertion as a foil to the modern scientific world view that seeks to command and control nature, often to the detriment of the planet, upsetting the delicate balance of nature (Kawagley, 2011).

My sojourn through Kawagley's writings stirred deep reflection within me raising the question: What is the best possible outcome when every educational experience is rooted in a love for place—for mother nature, for our waterways, for the canopies of trees, for the protective layers of our atmosphere (Kawagley, 2011)? This realization hit me at my core, compelling me to confront the absurdity of humanity's failings—our fractals of division and discord scaling and spreading like a relentless cancer. Yet, amidst this chaos, one truth remains undeniable: nature will endure long after humankind. The last laugh will not belong to the industrialists choking the planet with the destruction of the Amazon rainforest nor to neo-colonial prospectors extracting the last rich minerals from Ghana while polluting verdant waterways (a practice known to Ghanians as "galamsey," which today is accelerating river ecosystem collapse). Nature will have the final victory, reclaiming its balance long after we are all gone.

This reckoning led me to contemplate an educational paradigm grounded in Indigenous knowledge—a course correction away from a toxic, burning world wrought by industrial greed. In his piece "Love and Caring for Balance," Kawagley (2002) writes, "our ancestors and parents knew what they were doing when they provided an education based on knowing who you are and where you are" (p. 6). This phrase, often echoed in Indigenous thought, and much like the quote about education being a function of dying satiated, reveals another truism: the existence of self is inextricably linked to the existence of place. Kawagley draws consistent connections between identity and environment, reminding us that, to know ourselves, we must honor and respect the world around us.

## To Die Satiated with Life (Synthetical)

Dad called once at 4:47am—I missed that one. It would be another two hours later on that Monday, December 2nd, at 6:45am that I'd learn the news that the patriarch of our family, my grandpa, passed away peacefully in his sleep at the age of 90. Dad's voice was calm and steely-sweet, "Naimah, you awake, sweetie? Honey, your grandpa passed this morning at 2:30 a.m." I whispered my dua (prayer) so as not to wake my partner Jake: "Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un" (Surely we come from God, and surely to God we will return). Grandpa had lived two years longer than the doctors predicted, his worn body a testament to age and a life of backbreaking labor. His once-strong vessel had grown frail quickly, prompting more visits, more kisses, and more lingering moments with him. Dad's call wasn't a surprise, but it didn't stop the quiet tears from streaming down my barely open, pre-dawn eyes.

Asking through morning rasp, I spoke, "When do you think grandpa's janazah (funeral prayer) will be?" In any other family or faith tradition, this might seem like an insensitive question to ask on just hearing of the passing of your grandfather. In Islam though, burials are fast, often taking place within 24 hours, to facilitate the body's swift return to the earth. "We're talking to the Imam now. The janazah could be as soon as tomorrow, or as late as Wednesday. I'll call you as soon as I know." I rose from my warm bed, shaking from the chilly tears that clung to my face. In the few paces it took to reach the bathroom sink, I decided that we drive home to DC. We cancelled music lessons, work meetings, and we quickly packed our bags, black suits, dresses, and matching hijabs. By late morning, we were eastward bound on that eight-and-a-half-hour drive.

Grandpa was ready to go. At 90, his life as a nonagenarian wasn't just a step closer to 100; it was an off-ramp into the next life, the eternal hereafter Muslims call "Jannah," described in the Qur'an as "gardens with rivers flowing beneath them." The promise of eternal peace and the ultimate reward—seeing Allah (swt)—lit unmistakable joy in his eyes during his final days. He had this deliberate blink I realize now he'd had my whole life, signaling an assured, "I know this is fact," kind of acceptance.

On the drive over, we comforted each other with reminders that we were on our way to celebrate Grandpa's life—not mourn his death. "I'm just glad he's out of that sick body," my aunt said, when I checked-in on her. When I called dad to check in, he was quick and focused, voice tender with the weight of duty, "I'm good honey. Just headed to the ghusl (Islamic ritual bathing of the body)." In that moment, beyond the dutiful inflection of his voice, I heard a quivering. My dad is not a crier—he is funny and joyful, wearing his emotions on his sleeve—but tears were rare.

Over 90 years, my grandfather carved a path of self-determination that defied the racialized constraints of his circumstances. He survived the mean Baltimore streets of 1940s and 50s enlisted in the Air Force, was a prized boxer, raised 12 children, and became a scholar of Qur'anic Arabic and a pillar in the Washington, DC, Muslim community. Nothing brought him more joy than studying the Qur'an in its original language.

A man of practicality, Grandpa embodied an ethos of "do for self." His urban Capitol Heights garden was a testament to that principle, bursting with greens, beans, tomatoes, and even figs, pears, and concord grapes. At 85, he scaled the exterior of his two-story house to repaint it entirely on his own, a feat of strength my uncle Sahib proudly shared on Facebook. When he joined The Muslim American Logic Institute (M.A.L.I.), he sought to understand the Qur'an on his own terms, untethered from the politics and exclusive interpretive hold he observed from traditionalist clerics, which often left Black worshipers at the margins. For Grandpa, understanding the Qur'an

was not about orthodoxy but a self-led quest for understanding: "I don't need no one interpreting my Qur'an for me. I know the Arabic. I can do that myself."

Studying with Grandpa was joyous. As I read and interpreted the text of Ad-Dhuha (The Morning Hours), a sura (or chapter) in the Qur'an, he'd correct me with the widest grin—proud of my attempt, but firm: "No! The ta marbuta has more meaning than just adding the feminine—it means God's love, you see?" He insisted on a strict grammatical interpretation, not for dogma's sake, but in search of some level of personal clarity. His passion for precise meaning, free from the ideological constraints of orthodoxy, inspired me. Grandpa waited for no one and navigated his way through life on his own instruments—tools fine-tuned to offer clarity in even the cloudiest contexts. Qur'an was no different.

In those months leading up to Grandpa's passing, he was as sharp as ever, telling stories that carried the same youthful mischief as the sage wisdom that defined his life. He often spoke of his boyhood in Baltimore, where his friends called him "Cakes," short for Johnny Cakes—a nickname earned after he was caught stealing cakes from a local bakery to keep from going hungry. His almond eyes sparkled with boyish joy as he recounted his run-ins with the neighborhood gang, the Playboys. Their leader, weirdly nicknamed "Burnt Meat," tormented Grandpa until one day, fed up, my grandpa climbed to the roof of a rowhouse and dropped a brick on his bully's head. "Did you kill him?" I asked, wide-eyed. "No," he chuckled, "but I busted his head open real good!" From that day forward, Grandpa never heard from Burnt Meat again.

Grandpa's life was a masterclass in drawing larger meaning from a world and a time with few available information networks to liberate the Black mind (Asante, 2007). He found answers as to why he experienced the excruciating challenges of a racialized society in the Nation of Islam, which helped him unlearn intergenerational narratives of inferiority passed down from the Hutchins family, who enslaved our ancestors. Disillusioned by the Nation after the death of Elijah Muhammad, years later he converted the entire family to Sunni Islam, changing our family name from Hutchins to Bilal, one additional untethered step away from the long lineage of slavery. He created his own curriculum for life, one that balanced the spiritual and the practical, the intellectual and the natural.

His final years were filled with stories and reflections, all bound by a thread of self-determination. "Never let no man tell you what you can and can't do," he often said, not as a triumph but as a warning shaped by his lived experience. Grandpa navigated his course—choosing his curriculum, learning deeply from it, and running it fully to the end. Just before crossing the finish line, he beamed at the idea of returning to Allah (swt), assured and at peace. He left this world satiated with his life because, in defiance of every force that sought to constrain him, he chose his path and lived it to its fullest.

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# I Was Rather a Story

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I come from a family of 8 with 5 siblings and my parents. Growing up in Ghana, we all lived in a small compound house. We shared one bedroom and slept together in cramped spaces. Every day, my 5 siblings and I ate from one bowl and followed the directions of the eldest, as that was the norm in our household. In our family, individual voices often get lost. I never really had the opportunity to know myself, my potential, or my identity. My thoughts, desires, and aspirations were overshadowed by the collective rhythm of the family. My father's views were always right without room for debate or dissent. We were made to understand that fathers know best, and questioning their perspectives was not tolerated. This environment reinforced the adage that a child must be seen and not heard. Personal expression was rare; we moved as one, and decisions were often made for us by the older siblings or my parents. Our parents wake up every morning, and the first thing they do is to give instructions for house chores before we go to school, even before meals are served. Instructions weren't mere suggestions but a strict roadmap for the morning. Sweeping the compound, fetching water, cleaning the dishes, and organizing the living area were tasks expected to be completed with precision and urgency. Breakfast often felt like an afterthought, something you hurriedly grabbed on your way out if time was left. This daily routine became a defining rhythm of our mornings. In this household, my late father stood as the final authority.

When my parents were away, my two older siblings, Kwaku and Kwame, ruled the house like seasoned captains steering a ship. Their voices carried the weight of authority, and their instructions for house chores were commands, not suggestions. We followed without question, bound by an unspoken understanding that their word was law in our temporary kingdom. Their presence was like the sun and the moon, inescapable forces that dictated the rhythm of our days that brooked neither dissent nor negotiation. Tasks were divided among us based on age and ability, but fairness was not always guaranteed. I remember one morning when Kwaku, the oldest, assigned me the seemingly endless task of sweeping the compound while Kwame supervised the younger ones fetching water from the nearby waterpipe. In performing these tasks, we knew that disobedience was never an option, as it was quickly met with a stern lecture or a reminder of the family's code of ethics. There were moments when I envied friends in our neighborhood who seemed to have some freedom. They made their own choices anytime there was an opportunity for us to play together. But deep down, I understood that our way of life was shaped by our cultural identity and family background. My childhood days revolved around fulfilling roles and responsibilities assigned to me, with little room for my desires. The culture of authority that permeated our family left little space for voicing my perspective, much like the saying *speak when you are spoken to.* In many ways, I felt like I was living, but it was as though I never truly existed.

Although these moments taught me resilience and the importance of working with others, they also left me questioning the balance between individuality and community. I often wondered whether my voice and desires mattered, or if I was destined to always follow in the shadow of my older siblings' and parents' authority. In this environment, I never truly explored who I was or what I could become. It wasn't until later in life that I began discovering my identity, separated from the collective experience of my childhood. My background occasionally influenced my perspective

on the importance of listening to others and valuing their contributions, especially in contexts of shared goals. My early experiences going through these dynamics provide a personal lens through which I can critically engage with ideas about hierarchy, equity, and collaboration in leadership.

As I grew older, I started to realize how much I had lost in following the routines and expectations set by my family. I had no clear sense of who I was, what I wanted, or what I could achieve. The sense of individuality that many experienced growing up was foreign to me. My potential was hidden, even from myself, as I focused solely on blending into the structure of the family. I didn't question it then; it was simply the way things were. These feelings and environment align with the philosophies of Freire (1968/2020), who interpreted such experience as an example of the banking model of life, where individuals passively accept prescribed roles and expectations without questioning or critically engaging with their desires and potentials. Freire noted that this form of uncritical adherence can lead to a sense of dehumanization, as it suppresses one's capacity for self-determination and critical consciousness. Freire, however, asserted that these experiences should serve as the building blocks of reclaiming agency, an essential step in breaking free from oppressive structures, even those embedded within family or cultural norms. There was a time in school when I chose to take on a leadership role in a group project, believing it would challenge me and help me grow. However, I underestimated the nuances that come with working with a team that had conflicting interests and personalities. Any attempt to mediate and keep everyone on track backfired. I became frustrated and misunderstood. This moment of regret is in line with Aoki's (1993) notion of the lived curriculum, where he acknowledged the complexity and multiplicity of human experiences. Aoki asserted that, though these feelings could be challenging, they are also integral to personal growth. They push us to go through tensions, and we learn from them.

The first day I stepped onto college campus as a freshman I felt an overwhelming sense of relief. A weight I didn't even realize I had been carrying seemed to lift off my shoulders. For the first time, I was no longer bound by the rigid routines of my family life. I didn't have to wake up to a barrage of instructions or rush to complete tasks before starting my day. It was a strange, almost foreign feeling to wake up and decide for myself how my day would unfold. The silence of my new environment felt liberating, and the independence I was afforded became a revelation. It was as if I could finally breathe, unencumbered by the collective demands of my family. For the first time, I had the space and freedom to explore who I was, what I wanted, and what I could become. College became not just an academic pursuit but a personal journey of self-discovery and healing. It marked the beginning of a chapter where my voice, dreams, and identity could finally take center stage. The structured routines of my family life had been a safety net, even if they limited my individuality, and stepping beyond them left me vulnerable to the uncertainties of choice and self-direction. In my second year in college, schooling became like a double-edged sword. It was a space to explore my potential and expand my world, yet also one where I confronted fears of failure and the weight of responsibility for my decisions. I was like a bird taking flight against a strong wind or like a flower blooming beautifully but briefly. This is in congruence with Freire (1968/2020), who underscored that freedom is not simply the absence of oppression, but an active, often challenging process of conscientization. According to Freire, stepping into freedom requires critical awareness and the courage to challenge internalized constraints. It can be disorienting, but it is essential for genuine transformation. In this context, I believe that the dangers of freedom lie not only in external risks but in the internal struggle to redefine oneself without losing the grounding that provides a sense of belonging and identity. The steady shores of family life, though confining, sometimes feel like the only safe harbor in chaos. In this way, freedom became both a gift and a challenge. I was free, but I felt lost. Freedom felt

heavy, like a door open to endless paths but with no clear direction to follow. Freedom is exciting, yet freedom can be overwhelming. Freedom gives, but freedom also takes. In my final year, the structure I once relied on was gone, and every decision was mine. I gradually began to unearth pieces of myself. It was a long process of undoing the layers of silence and conformity that had shaped my childhood and learning. I knew I had a voice and dreams separate from the collective expectations I had grown up with.

After I graduated from college, I had the opportunity to teach in a community high school. In this environment, I was expected to apply the principles of universal design in my classroom. However, I often found myself doing the opposite. Meanwhile, I graduated from college as a trained special educator. I taught all students as though they were identical pieces in a puzzle, expected to fit into a singular educational framework. This was not something deliberate but rather the result of my childhood training and experiences, where no child ever had the opportunity to eat what we wanted—something I call a home-based one-size-fits-all practice. I had barely learned to weave the personal identities, experiences, and learning needs of my students into my teaching methods. I relied on traditional approaches, assuming that the self of one student could be mirrored in another, like passing the same key to unlock different doors. Interestingly, I treated the classroom as a single canvas. I painted broad strokes and hoped that the same color would suit everyone. But as I continued teaching, I began to realize that education is not about shaping identical molds but about recognizing that every student is a unique story with their pages to fill. This is consistent with the idea that classroom content is not just a structured program but a personal and dynamic journey (Pinar, 2004). I tried to pour each student into the same mold, expecting the same shape to emerge. However, little did I know that students are like gardens; you cannot water a rose the same way you would a cactus. What was I doing then? And who was I then? A teacher? Of course not! I think I was educated but uninformed. Those who saw me could probably describe me as a seasoned educator. But for me, I saw myself as someone who was waiting for the month to end to collect my salary; I was educated on paper but a layman at heart. The individuality of each student should have guided my teaching approaches, yet my lack of experience in this area meant I missed the opportunity to nurture each student's distinct potential. I think if the classroom could talk, it might gently point out some of the things I overlooked, particularly how I failed to truly see the self of each student in my teaching approach. It would remind me of the times when I treated students as though they were pages from the same book, rather than unique stories. The classroom might whisper that it noticed how I taught from a place of efficiency. I used methods designed to cover content but not necessarily to uncover the individual experiences, voices, and identities within its walls. It would likely say, "You've been a diligent teacher, but sometimes you missed the subtle cues—the questions unasked, the hands not raised, the quiet voices waiting to be heard." The classroom might point out how, in my rush to meet objectives, I often left behind the opportunity to connect with the deeper selves of my students.

In 2021, as my teaching career advanced, I was appointed a lecturer in the Department of Special Education at the University of Education, Winneba, in Ghana. It was within this new environment that my story took an entirely different turn. This appointment marked a significant evolution in my professional journey. In this environment, I decided not to treat students as if they were the same. Instead, I embraced their differences and crafted individual students as unique as themselves. Each student was in a world of their own. I gradually realized that every student required distinct teaching aids, assessment methods, and instructional strategies to help them grow and succeed. It was a stark contrast to my earlier teaching experiences, where a one-size-fits-all approach dominated the classroom. Here, I learned to see each student as an individual, with their

own pace, strengths, and needs, and to adjust my teaching to reflect that. For most professors in the college, standardized examinations were the norm and were widely regarded as essential for maintaining consistency and accountability. More often than not, these assessments imposed a rigid, one-size-fits-all structure and failed to account for the individuality of students or the complex, nuanced contexts in which learning occurs. As I strove to create inclusive, culturally responsive spaces for students thrive, I recognized the tension between my vision of individualized teaching and the penalties I could face for breaking the college policies that mandated standardized assessments. Just as we hold differing views on standardized exams, there has been considerable debate among scholars about their impact on students' achievement.

While Hirsch (1987) argued that standardized assessments provide a reliable measure of student performance and ensure accountability, Tienken (2016) contended that they often fail to capture the full spectrum of a student's abilities, creativity, and critical thinking. Hirsch posited that standardized assessment is a tool for promoting accountability and to ensure that all students acquire the foundational knowledge necessary for success. He argued that standardized exams provide a measurable framework to evaluate educational outcomes and ensure that schools are meeting essential learning objectives. Hirsch contended that, without standardized benchmarks, disparities in education might widen. He noted that it could leave some students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, without access to equitable learning opportunities. His perspective emphasized the role of standardized testing in fostering a shared, coherent curriculum. Tienken opined, however, that such assessments often fail to prepare students for the complexities of the modern world by focusing on rote memorization and narrow skill sets. Tienken further emphasized the need for curricula that prioritize creativity, critical thinking, and adaptability. The position of Tienken resonates with my approach to individualized teaching, where differentiated instruction and culturally responsive lessons are tools to empower students. Theses approaches allow students to see themselves and their histories reflected in their education. Despite the constraints of college policies, which sometimes do not allow for individualized assessment, I aim to challenge these systemic barriers, much like Love (2023) calls for educators to fight against oppressive educational systems. Love highlights the detrimental effects of policies that marginalize students, and urged educators to advocate for practices that affirm students' identities and aspirations. In my classroom, I envision fostering an environment where equity is prioritized, even within the bounds of standardized frameworks. In the second year of my PhD journey at Miami University, I was introduced to *currere* by Dr. Thomas Poetter, in the course, Curriculum Innovation. In this course, I questioned whether the individualized approach I practiced in college fully aligns with the principles of *currere*. *Currere*, as I understand it, calls for a deep reflection on the self, connecting the past, present, and future to one's learning and teaching practices (Pinar, 2004). It prompts me to consider whether the strategies I used in the college, while effective, allowed students to explore and express their narratives or if I was still imposing my structure onto their learning. In the college, we catered to each student's needs, but did we fully engage with their personal histories, dreams, and identities the way *currere* suggests?

## SO, WHO AM I?

How can I use my current roles as a teacher, student, father, son, and spouse to tackle the challenges students face, especially for those with disabilities under unfavorable national and school policies? I will soon step into the classroom of Miami University as an instructor, planting

seeds of knowledge and advocacy. I go there with a determination to create an environment where every student can bloom. On Tuesdays and Wednesdays, I sit at the desk as a student. I sharpen my tools of understanding and critique the systems that fail to support those who need it most. Later, when I go home, I assume the role of a father. As a father, I try to nurture my beloved baby (Naa Doodowaa) with love and empathy. I strive to teach her to stand tall against injustice. With my wife, I am a spouse. I weave dreams of equity into our shared lives by strategizing ways to push for change. And on the phone with my mother back in Ghana, I am a son. I honor the past and challenge my roots to embrace progress. In every role, I carry the fight for the most marginalized. I seek to dismantle policies that limit their potential, one step, one conversation, one lesson at a time. My various identities as a teacher, student, father, spouse, and son offer me unique perspectives in the fight against injustice and inequity, both in educational settings and in my personal life. Each role enables me to engage with these issues differently. Together, they allow me to disrupt oppressive systems and create spaces where justice and inclusivity flourish.

As a teacher, I hold the power to teach and to disrupt. Drawing from Love (2023) I see my role as a fighter within the system, where students, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, are often punished for daring to dream beyond the confines of societal expectations. In my classroom, I imagine creating spaces where students don't just survive but thrive. Like planting seeds of liberation, I hope to weave culturally responsive lessons that reflect the rich histories and stories of those often silenced, pushing students to challenge oppressive systems and imagine new possibilities for themselves. As a teacher, I am on the frontlines of education and can directly impact how students experience learning. I design inclusive lessons, implement differentiated instruction, and advocate for individualized support that caters to the diverse needs of my students. Even in the face of restrictive school policies, I create a classroom environment that promotes equity, where students feel valued and included. I hope to use my position to make sure students are not punished by policies that deny them the right to dream and succeed.

As a student, I seek to approach my learning as a form of resistance, much like Love, anywhere Black and Brown students' ambitions are stifled by institutional barriers. I challenge the traditional curriculum built to maintain the status quo and instead embrace critical perspectives that question power and privilege. My journey as a minority student is a testament to how I can reclaim my education, turning every lecture, and every reading into a tool for deconstructing inequity. In the classroom, I seek to become a co-conspirator, who actively participates in reshaping the narratives of students so that dreams are no longer punished but celebrated. As a student, especially one researching inclusive education, I aspire to use my studies as a platform for critical engagement with the policies that negatively impact all students. As a father, I recognize that the home is the first battleground where dreams are nurtured and stifled. Inspired by Love's call for radical imagination, I envisage a space where my child will be free to dream boldly and love fiercely. I see my role as planting the seeds of social justice in her heart and teaching her to identify and resist the subtle forces of racism and inequity she will inevitably encounter. I hope she will see love as not just an emotion but an act of resistance against a world that often punishes those who dream beyond its narrow confines. I understand that advocating for students begins at home. Hence, I will ensure that my child is aware of the importance of inclusivity. I will also work to educate other parents about the challenges faced by marginalized students, build a community of support that can collectively push back against unfavorable school policies. Just as Love emphasizes the need for community-driven activism, I believe parents can be powerful advocates for policy changes that benefit all children. As a son, I hope to go through the delicate balance between honoring tradition and pushing for change. I know that some biases and inequities stem

from home and community, so I will initiate those difficult conversations with my elders, and act as a bridge between generations. I will honor my heritage while pushing it forward by ensuring that my family is part of the collective fight for a future where dreams are no longer restricted. As a spouse, I will treat our partnership as a foundation for building the world we want to see. I will ensure our relationship is a haven where equity and justice are practiced daily. I want our love to grow out of modeling the type of love and mutual respect that can dismantle oppressive structures. Together, we will be co-dreamers, and stand side by side in the fight against inequity, support each other's activism, and challenge the oppression we see in the world around us. Our love, like Love's vision, will be revolutionary, a force that nurtures dreams rather than punishes them. I am all of these; one person, many roles, each with a part to play in creating a more inclusive world.

Emotionally, I am more attuned to the need for vulnerability and self-reflection in my teaching and research. Drawing from the work of Poetter (2025) and the concept of *currere*, I now realize that my own personal history, struggles, and growth are central to how I approach both leadership and the work I hope to do in the future. I am committed to continuing to unravel my own story to understand the impact of my upbringing and how it shapes my teaching philosophy and leadership style. My role as a father, son, and spouse only deepens my commitment to advocating for change, as these roles constantly remind me of the importance of nurturing spaces where voices are heard, and dreams are not punished. Looking ahead, my academic and professional goals are taking shape around the idea of leadership that is not only inclusive but transformative. I hope to use my dissertation on social justice leadership to challenge the inequities in educational systems, particularly in the context of inclusive education in Ghana. Through this work, I want to contribute to the ongoing conversation on how educational systems can truly embrace all students, acknowledge their full humanity and potential, and dismantle the systems that restrict their growth.

My father came to wish that he had created a more open and nurturing space for us during our childhood. He realized how the rigid structure of our upbringing stifled my early self-discovery and how its effects lingered in my career and made it harder for me to find my footing. The lack of freedom to express myself or explore my individuality left scars that took years to heal. My siblings, too, have taken different paths. They have turned away from the traditions and values we were raised with. Anytime I visit them and see their children play freely in the living area, it reminds me of what we missed, like birds confined to a cage, never knowing the joy of spreading their wings in open skies. It's bittersweet to see how these lessons came too late for my father, who, before he passed on, wished he had allowed us the freedom to dream, question, and grow in a more supportive environment. His reflections are a reminder that childhood is not just about discipline and order but also about creating space for self-expression and the growth of unique identities. Despite it all, I have found a way to go through these challenges, but I can't help but wonder how different our lives might have been if home had been a place where dreams were nurtured instead of subdued. The journey is still unfolding.

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# WALKING IN RELATION
## A THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CROSS-CULTURAL APPROACH

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### WALKING AS A THEORY OF LIFE AND LEARNING

What if history repeats itself in each person, each echo a reminder of choices made, paths taken, and the patterns that emerge? In a world shaped by cycles of repetition and disruption, the very tension between these forces becomes a space for critical reflection. Trauma is a narrative wound that persists, repeating in ways that demand our attention to confront and transform. While walking in India, I learned that the study of history is about human capabilities. People are capable of both good and evil and everything in between. "In the west, people tend to think history is a series of events, but it's a spectrum of human potential" (Acharya Yogi Vinay, personal communication, 2024). Indigenous frameworks recognize the interwoven nature of personal and collective histories (Smith, 1999).

India's history comes from two books, *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat*. The first is the life of Rama, and the second is Khrisna. These are not mere myths but lenses revealing the spectrum of human possibilities, emotions, family, business, society, etc. Much like Kimmerer's (2013) understanding of Indigenous wisdom as a tapestry of stories and teachings that reveal our relationship with the land, community, and Self, if we look at a person's life and look for meaning through a generalizable cultural lens, we can see the entirety of history in one individual. A kaleidoscope of a trillion potential outcomes swirls before us.

As I walked through these histories, each step became an entry point into past and present entanglements. Walking is not just a physical act; it is the rhythm of inquiry. Walking threads meaning into lived experiences, bridging ecological, political, and personal dimensions (Solnit, 2001). Yet, we find ourselves tethered to the past, to the lives of others, caught within a familiar and confining threshold, arrested moments in time offering a lens to view the past, shape our decisions, and transform futures. Does the repetitive manifestation of trauma re-cycle, or do we harness these patterns for transformation? Recognizing that the moment of potential change is not about escaping the past but about engaging in these constellations actively, not as a passive observer but as co-creators of meaning in the lessons that shape our journey toward a more intentional and conscious future (Benjamin, 1968). As we face histories of inequality, disruption, and resistance, we find the potential for connection at the intersection of repetition and transformation. The tension between what has been and what could be offers space to critically examine how we move forward—not by forgetting our histories, but by revisiting and reinterpreting them with renewed purpose, creating new paths for social change and collective action. Walking as a pedagogy is a transformative practice where theory and practice meet in body and space. Springgay and Truman (2018) argue that walking creates spaces to muddy places and knowings between the personal and the political. This perspective is essential in understanding

walking as an act of personal movement and a means to engage in relational inquiry, where embodied knowledge connects with social and ecological contexts.

As a pedagogical strategy, walking offers a relational and embodied way of knowing, bridging the gap between theory and practice. This aligns with Anyon's (2008) assertion that theory is a powerful tool to deepen research and enrich empirical work. By incorporating walking into educational contexts, researchers and educators can move beyond static methods and engage in a dynamic, iterative process that fosters critical thinking and relational understanding, resists static definitions, and instead emerges with each step attuned to the ecological, political, and personal dimensions of research—an unfolding rhythm of inquiry.

**Walking.** Footsteps thread my bones together.

We evolved to walk long distances. A rhythm stitched into our bodies. Walking has always been my escape. Foot after foot, ground meeting soul. Always moving, never still. My genetic code set in motion truths I was yet to know. Each trail pulling me to its natural end.

I was
walking when
it happened…

A cop stood at the house's threshold, his voice as flat as asphalt. Words fell heavy in the empty void between him and me.

Your biological father walked

out

onto the highway.

a soccer mom couldn't


But what of the space between? Between foot and earth? Between motion and stillness? A tension. The rhythm of walking reflects something older than me, older than him. Is this an ancestral inheritance, a form of embodied history? The body keeps the score of our traumas, holding memories of our lives and those passed down to us (van der Kolk, 2014).

in time.

In time, walking reveals not only the rhythm of thought but the forces that shape our movements. The paths we choose are not random; they are guided by memory, shaped by personal and collective histories. Our orientation to objects influences how we navigate the world (Ahmed, 2006), weaving past and present into the directions we take.

Walking clears my head. I love dirt paths the most—the ones that wind along creek beds, cut through cornfields, and sidewalks cracking under the pressure of roots. With each step, my feet

press into the earth, a palimpsest of his steps, my steps—a history I cannot escape. Paths twist toward ends and edges. But this has no finality.

Only more steps.

I follow them.

If I inherit the paths he walked, do I inherit his pain, too? Is my propensity for walking nurture or nature? Questions linger pregnant in the air as the ground beneath me hums with the history of his stride.

Memories linger—the stale scent of cheap whiskey filling my nostrils.

As night draws its curtains, Mak's whisper shatters the silence. She grinds fish sauce, tamarinds, salt, chilies, and sugar in the hollow heart of the stone mortar. The pungent scent fills the air. Amidst the rhythmic thrum of the pestle, her gaze holds mine, ensuring the weight of her tale takes root—a symbolic journey through the shadows of history:

"ការដើរនៅពេលយប់គឺមានគ្រោះថ្នាក់បុរសស្លៀកពាក់ខ្មៅមើល."

"Walking alone at night is dangerous with the man in black watching."

The shadow lingers at the edges of her memory—a silent reminder of the Khmer Rouge.

What does it mean to walk in the shadow of someone like that?

Imaginary spaces of conciliation, where such memories might find release, remain tethered to the land and the bodies that survived (Garneau, 2012). Walking is an act of memory and creation, a way to honor history lessons while forging paths that resist its most violent repetitions.

My feet press against the earth—my mind caught in a threshold, somewhere between the man in black and the father I never truly knew. I cannot move forward without carrying him with me—each step an imprint, a scar, settling deep into the bones of my feet. The weight of it becomes part of me.

My feet, too, seem to remember. With each step, the ground forces its way through the skin. Knitting itself into the framework of my body. Like an osseous anomaly—a small, extra splinter of bone emerging where the body once bore pressure repeatedly like a mill grinding corn—a natural response to weight.

But what is the weight of memory?

What shape does it leave in me?

My feet are not just bones—they are records. The way they bend, stretch, and resist speak of a history—perhaps not only my own but ones I cannot escape. My feet carry the marks of his absence, his steps lingering in the shadow of mine, but in a way I never chose. My toes curl to grasp what is lost, finding unexpended threads of connection.

Pa calls me to dress and walk with him to the Wat. Draped in robes of bright orange, Monks chant a melody both hypnotic and ancient. We bow, a humble dance before their presence. The monks gracefully dip lotus flowers into a golden, water-filled vessel. In a single, fluid motion, pink blossoms pirouette on their green stalks, scattering droplets of lotus-scented water.

A sacred ballet unfolds—a tapestry of reverence in the tranquil heart of the Wat.

Pa locates a seat for us on the floor of the communal stilt building. After the monks have chosen from the offerings, he hands me a bowl of food. "I was at the University when it happened," he said. "I was a professor. I saw the tanks from my office window as they drove down the national highway."

I know what he has to say is urgent; as a Khmer man, he would often tend to the fruit trees or nap in the living room rather than socializing.

His voice is rhythmic, his sentences short. "I raced downstairs to my moto to get home to Mak and your three brothers. We didn't know what to do. First, we were told we would be sent to a work camp in Kampong Cham. But I bribed a man in black to send us to Battambang, where we had family. I didn't know they were mass-killing intellectuals in Kampong Cham."

His voice cracks. "The man in black separated Mak and me from your three brothers. The boys were sent to reeducation. They were taught to be men in black—to supervise the labor and punishment of the adults."

His face becomes tender. His eyes no longer see me but relive ghosts from his past.

His shoulders soften as he speaks. "Mak was pregnant when we were forced into the rice fields. The baby would have been a girl (srey) child, but she lost her due to the amount of labor and a lack of nutrition."

His pauses stretch for an eternity. "We were unfortunate for so long for losing our baby srey." His face and shoulders soften, and he breathes deeply. Then he turns to look at me, "But, now she has returned to us, beloved Sarai."

Do these bones grow differently? Life lived long before me. The land beneath shifts, and I understand less and more with each step. Something is growing in my bones, shaped by the tension between foot and earth, motion and stillness. I don't just walk forward. I walk back. I walk in circles, revisiting and re-feeling the pressure and the absence.

Like accessory ossicles that appear in response to constant motion, my body makes something new in space where there once was nothing—shaped by repetition—by the pattern of lost and found.

It's a question I'm still learning to ask: if I inherit the paths he walked, do I inherit the bones he never knew to grow?

## Walking and Memory

Walking is the thread that binds the following stories together. A bridge across time and space. Four cultures, four traditions—yet all rooted in walking as a way to reconnect with what has been lost.

Our first steps are always

u
n
ev
en.

One foot,
then the other.
Slow at first, uncertain, attempts to find balance.

The Jewish people have walked through centuries of diaspora, genocide, and slavery. From the stories we tell about the significance of walking, the exodus out of Egypt, 40 years in the desert, to the Spanish Inquisition, where many walked to neighboring Portugal, North Africa, or the Ottoman Empire, carrying with them fragments of their culture and faith (Baer, 1961), to the forced marches of the Holocaust, walking has been both a means of escape and a testament to endurance.

My ancestors walked to preserve their lives and faith, carrying in their steps the weight of unimaginable loss and the stubborn hope of survival. My family's story is one of walking—walking for solace, for a way to carry the weight of trauma passed down like heirlooms, tarnished but unyielding.

My biological father walked, too.

During his military service in Japan, he found himself in the company of Hopi and Diné tribal members. He saw something in their rhythm—a way of walking that was more than movement.

A method. A theory.

They tried to teach him that walking wasn't just about the journey; it was ceremony, an act of being with the land and its stories.

When he returned to the U.S., he continued to walk, hitchhiking to Hopi mesas and Diné lands, searching for something.

Peace.

Perhaps.

He brought me back gifts from those journeys: dolls dressed in Diné ribbon dresses, statues, and storybooks. Although he wasn't present, those gifts were his way of teaching me how to walk.

Heal;

They were fragments of something larger—something he was searching for himself, something that took my walking to be able to name.

For the Diné, walking is sacred. The Long Walk—a forced march in the 1860s—left deep scars, yet the Diné people have reclaimed walking as a ceremonial act (Denetdale, 2007; Iverson & Roessel, 2002). The Diné resisted erasure. The concept of Hózhó, walking in beauty and harmony, became a counter-narrative, emphasizing balance and resilience even amidst displacement. They walk in prayer, their steps carrying offerings of corn pollen to the land and sky (Begay & Maryboy, 2000; McPherson, 1992; Wilson, 2008). For the Hopi, walking is intertwined with their spiritual worldview. The Salt Pilgrimage, a ceremonial pilgrimage, is a journey through arid deserts to gather salt from the Grand Canyon, tracing ancestral paths and weaving stories into the landscape (Geertz, 1994; Kimmerer, 2013; Whiteley, 1988).

Walking is how I imagine him, though healing is never simple. It hasn't been for me. I was born Jewish, adopted, and raised far from my roots. I grew up in the echoes of displacement. Trauma reverberated in the frequency of drug and alcohol use. Brave Heart (2003) duly names this the historical trauma response. It is a wound that never entirely closes, reshaping the lives it touches.

I carried my wounds on me while walking in Cambodia, another people and land shaped by a violent history but alive with resistance. Under the Khmer Rouge, countless families were forced into death marches, evacuated from their homes, and sent to labor camps (Chandler, 2008). Those who survived carried the scars of those forced steps, yet some walked back—to their villages, Wats, and rituals that tethered them to their history and land.

There, I found Khmer families who welcomed me into their lives and stories. They showed me how they honored their past—not by erasing the pain but by weaving it into their rituals. For Pchum Ben Khmer, people walk around the Wat—their steps deliberate, their prayers whispered into the stillness of the early morning—leaving rice, candies, and bottles of water to honor and feed their ancestors. It reminded me of the Jewish tradition of yahrzeit, the annual remembering of the dead. Both rituals share a common purpose: reconnecting with what has been lost and binding the present to the past through acts of care and remembrance.

My Khmer family taught me how to walk differently—how to move with intention, to see walking as an act of healing, a way of reclaiming, rooted, not wandering. Smith (1999) calls for decolonizing methodologies as an academic pursuit and a way of being. To walk, she might argue, is to engage directly with land, history, and community. It is to reject abstraction, to insist on presence.

My father's walking was part of this legacy, though he didn't name it as such. As I trace the pathways of my father's life, I am reminded of Tsing's (2015) observation that disturbance can sometimes lead to livability. The fractures in our histories can become spaces of growth, much like the mushrooms she describes thriving in the ruins of capitalist destruction. The Hopi and Diné people tried to teach him how walking may bridge past and present, pain and peace. It wasn't about forgetting; it was learning how to carry with ease, finding space for new bone growth.

In Cambodia, I found a different rhythm. Mak, my Khmer mother, would tell stories while grinding spices with a mortar and pestle. The rhythmic motions of her hands became a kind of walking, too—a ceremony of memory and survival. Wilson (2008) speaks of research as ceremony, a relational act that honors the land and its stories. Mak's rituals were like that: acts of grounding, being present with the weight of history.

The Khmer Rouge had left scars on Mak's family, scars that she carried differently than my own family carried theirs. Yet, in her ceremonies, I saw resistance. In her stories, I found parallels to my own. Tuck and Yang (2012) remind me that *Decolonization is not a Metaphor*. Neither is walking. It is a refusal to stand still in the face of trauma.

To Kimmerer (2013), walking becomes a way of listening to the language of other beings, engaging with the land not as a backdrop but as an active participant in our narratives. The rhythm of our steps intertwines with the rhythms of the earth, forming an ecology of reciprocity and recognition. Each step presses against the earth—unsteady yet sure. To walk is to encounter the echoes of history. Each step resonates with what has come before, each pathway carved by decisions long past. Walking is not knowing in advance. It is becoming with the land, its textures and its silences. In this rhythm—feet striking the ground, breath rising and falling—theory ceases to be static. Walking is not a metaphor. It is a method. It is theory's undoing and its remaking.

This movement—tentative, deliberate—c r e a t e s s p a c e.

## Between Movement and Stasis: Theory in Action

Walking embodies the tension between repetition and transformation, offering a lens for evolving possible futures.

Walking as a method offers an opportunity to deepen educational research practices by integrating personal, ecological, and socio-political dimensions. In practical terms, it invites educators and researchers to step beyond the classroom, literally and figuratively, into the spaces where learning occurs organically. Walking ethnographies can uncover the hidden curricula of urban landscapes, revealing how spaces teach, exclude, or empower individuals. Walking alongside the communities with whom we co-create knowledge can disrupt traditional power dynamics and foster relational, participatory approaches to research.

Moreover, walking aligns with post-qualitative methodologies by rejecting predetermined frameworks and embracing the contingent and the emergent. Each step an opportunity to engage with the materiality of the histories embedded in environments and the affective dimensions of bodies walking in space. This methodological openness is particularly valuable in education, where rigid structures often dominate. Walking allows for a more nuanced exploration of how learners and educators navigate their shared environments.

## Walking as Pedagogy

Walking resists traditional epistemologies, pushing against the boundaries of ontological enclosure (St. Pierre, 2011). The act itself is uncontained and uncontainable, emerging from and entangled with the environments it traverses. Walking becomes an experiment in atonement to the material, the fleetingness, and the rhythm. Walking is theory set into motion, temporality embodied, and inquiry situated in the landscapes it touches. In these steps, I hear echoes of Solnit's (2001) reflections on walking as a way of thinking and discovering, a practice that bridges the conceptual and the physical. Walking as a mode of inquiry is a practice that grounds theory in lived experience. By inhabiting space and time differently, researchers open themselves to the possibilities that theory stirs with each step.

Walking disrupts traditional educational practices by emphasizing embodied learning over abstract theorization. In an academic context, walking fosters a pedagogy of presence, where students and educators engage directly with their environment, transforming learning into an active and relational process. One way to integrate walking into educational research methodologies

would be for scholars to step outside the confines of classrooms or labs and engage with communities and landscapes to be grounded in material realities. This shift counters the compartmentalization of knowledge and reconnects theory with the tactile and immediate.

Educational professionals can adapt the reflective practice of walking into rethinking curricula, pedagogy, and policy. The rhythm of walking facilitates deeper engagement with theoretical texts, translating abstract concepts into embodied understanding.

One such educational strategy to incorporate walking as a reflective practice in research would be to offer *walkshops*. These site-based walking discussions would have participants navigate spaces that are materially tied to specific socio-political or historical issues. For instance, while discussing critical race theory, students walk through a neighborhood affected by redlining, grounding abstract discussions with material culture. Such practices encourage students to perceive learning as a dynamic, participatory act rather than a static knowledge transfer. Walking becomes a counter-narrative to positivist, sedentary education, prompting educators to rethink the spatiality of teaching and learning.

## Walking in Contemporary Crises

Walking carries urgency, a quiet rebellion against the inertia of inaction. To walk is to confront landscapes scarred by extractive politics, ecological collapse, and colonial histories. Each footstep bears witness to these scars, becoming a tactile engagement with histories that are too often rendered invisible. Walking amidst these realities is witnessing—it changes the very structure of our bones. Repetition forges new ways to be attuned to systems in crisis and the precarity of bodies within them.

This is not a metaphoric transformation but a literal one. The body becomes a site of inscription where the rhythms of the land and the trauma of its histories leave their marks. Each step is a negotiation between resistance and surrender, between the will to move forward and the weight of what has been. In walking, the researcher does not stand apart from the crises they study but becomes entangled within them, their body and mind shaped by the rhythms of the terrain, by the echoes of the histories carried in the land itself.

Walking becomes an act of reckoning—a way of moving with, rather than apart from, the interconnected crises of the present. It demands an openness to the fleeting, to the fragile, to the ephemeral. It is a reminder that theory is not a static object but a rhythm, a pulse, an unfolding. Walking, as a method and a mode of inquiry, refuses the certainty of fixed epistemologies. It situates itself firmly in the flux of life, bearing witness to what is while opening a pathway to what could be. Walking intersects with the urgent global displacement crisis as a sociopolitical act. The historical forced marches of the Khmer Rouge's evacuation of Phnom Penh and the Diné's Long Walk exemplify how walking has been used as a tool for displacement and violence. These events echo the contemporary refugee crises, where walking often becomes a desperate act of survival. By acknowledging these histories, the field of education can use walking to explore how communities intersect on migration, memory, and the act of reappropriation as resistance.

Indigenous ceremonies of walking from the Hopi and Diné tribes serve as vibrant acts of reclamation and resistance, reaffirming relation with the land and its sacred significance. These practices challenge extractive paradigms and offer alternative frameworks for sustainability and stewardship, which are increasingly relevant in educational discourse (Cajete, 1994; Escobar, 2018).

Walking additionally provides a framework for examining neoliberalism's impact on public spaces and mobility. Urban walking reveals patterns of exclusion and accessibility, highlighting how socio-economic disparities manifest in the physical landscape. Future research from within the field of education might study how walking routes to schools reflect broader systemic inequities, linking these findings to discussions of policy and reform.

To be in relation with is to demand movement, presence, reflection, and reckoning.

As a form of resistance, walking challenges traditional frameworks and invites us into spaces of ambiguity. It is within this ambiguity—where movement and stillness converge—that theory's potential emerges, grappling with its simultaneous vitality and uselessness. This tension, the pull between movement and stasis, urgency and futility—is where theory feels vital and useless, alive and inert. What can theory truly offer in the face of ecological grief, dispossession, and displacement, where the weight of history bends present realities into distorted shapes? Perhaps, as Manning (2016) suggests, theory must shift its scale, becoming *minor*, fragmentary, and nomadic—a thread to weave through the gaps rather than a monolith to impose from above. Walking, then, becomes an enactment of minor theory: a step-by-step refusal of closure, an embodied questioning of how we come to know, live, and act in this fragile web of remembering, care, and imagining. Walking resists the need to predetermine outcomes, instead embracing what Butler (2022) describes as theoretical plasticity—responsiveness to the urgent issues of the moment.

Each step contains its own unspoken inquiry, its own unfolding. To walk is to engage not with answers but with the cadence of questions—where does the ground give way, where does it hold? This embodied act disrupts the certainty of grand theories, those abstractions polished smooth by distance from lived experience. Instead, walking demands an intimacy with the uneven terrain of the real—a willingness to stumble, pause, and find meaning in the rhythm of movement rather than its destination.

## Expanding Mobility and Theory

As I reflect on walking as a method, theory, and rhythm of life, I am reminded that this metaphor and application have their limits. Walking has been my way of navigating pain and memory, but I recognize it may not serve as a universal lens. Not everyone can walk, and to frame this theory without acknowledging the diverse ways we move through the world would be to erase those experiences.

Walking, for me, is a way of being in relation to the land, to memory, to others. In rethinking walking, I draw inspiration from disability justice activist Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018), who teaches us that accessibility is not a one-size-fits-all concept. For some, this relation manifests differently—through the movement of wheels, the stillness of breath, or other adaptive tools that enable connection. Each form of movement holds its own rhythm and resonance, shaping and being shaped by the spaces it traverses.

## Conclusion: Walking Toward Possibility

Walking returns us, again and again, to what Manning (2009) describes as the "preacceleration" (p. 13)—the not-yet of thought, a pregnant space where the potential for new ways of being flickers on the edge of realization. This aligns with Springgay and Truman's (2018) oblique contours, which emphasize the non-linear and relational nature of walking as a practice that defamiliarizes place and opens up possibilities for critical engagement. To walk in this way means to dwell in the liminal, where thoughts and movement interlace, where walking becomes a way to navigate the tensions between what is known and what is still forming.

Yet, walking is not a solitary act. It asks us to carry the weight of these tensions in others while making space to wonder together. Walking, as theory, too, needs space to breathe and shift its weight in resisting the dogmatic rigidity of calcification. Walking is not just a method but also a metaphor for theory's ongoing and unfinished work. It is a practice grounded in the present, moving towards the horizon.

In this movement, walking aligns with the urgency of the contemporary moment. It resists the demand for neat solutions, choosing instead the messy, relational, and dynamic processes of becoming. Walking as minor theory reminds us that, even in the face of loss, there is a rhythm to be found—a rhythm that opens the door to reimagining, to healing, to action.

This interplay between walking and theory underscores the broader tensions surrounding the use(lessness) of theory in research. While walking as theory may seem abstract, it confronts the tension between the abstract and the applied, challenging researchers to justify how theoretical frameworks contribute to or hinder knowledge production. Walking, as a theoretical and methodological approach, amplifies this tension. On the one hand, walking appears simple and tangible, yet on the other, it holds profound metaphorical and epistemological potential.

Abstract theories often risk alienating educators and learners from their day-to-day realities, while purely pragmatic approaches may overlook the deeper systems and structures shaping those realities. Walking offers a middle ground: a method that is both reflective and active, grounding theoretical inquiry in the physical and relational act of moving through space.

Walking disrupts traditional hierarchies of knowledge by situating theory within the body, the land, and the community—an approach that resists the linearity often imposed by positivist research paradigms, offering instead a fluid and emergent way of knowing. Walking becomes theory in action, where each step is an act of inquiry, an engagement with the material and historical conditions that shape our world. This interplay underscores the use of theory as a dynamic force, activated and reactivated through lived experience.

When divorced from immediate, measurable outcomes, theory becomes a useless abstraction. Walking addresses systemic educational inequities and policy failures, shifting the western priority of solution-focused inquiry to rewiring the mind to focus on the conditions that necessitate them. Walking as a method and theory offers complexity to conventional methodologies when the researcher is a situated embodied participant within the study, challenging researchers to dwell in the discomfort and ambiguity of unexpected insights and transformative possibilities.

Walking reorientates, shifting perspective on the land and the histories we carry. It is a way to queer linear trauma and healing narratives (Ahmed, 2006), embracing the complexity and multiplicity of lived experience. Similarly, Simpson's (2017) call for radical resistance through Indigenous practices informs my understanding of walking as a form of defiance—against the erasure of histories, against the commodification of land, against the linearity of colonial

temporality. At the intersections of healing, I pay respect to Jewish resistance, Khmer traditions, and Hopi and Diné wisdom These lessons are not just personal; they are political. As trauma is not just an event but an experience that reshapes the self (Caruth,1996). Walking reshapes each step of becoming. A way to navigate the complexity of memory and identity, to reconcile the fragmented pieces of bone that have grown in our feet.

Walking is about something other than arrival. It is about the journey—moving forward while carrying what came before. My father walked to find peace. My Khmer family walked to honor their ancestors. I walk to connect, to remember, to heal. The land remembers, too. It holds all the footprints of those who came before, the echoes of their stories, each step teetering between the tensions of repetition and transformation, daring to imagine futures different from our ancestors while remaining grounded in their lived knowledge.

In walking, we add to the tapestry, weaving together histories.

Navigating the tensions between theory's use and uselessness, walking emerges as a practice that bridges abstraction and action in educational research by offering a flexible and embodied approach to inquiry. Movement is used as a metaphor and practice to address urgent socio-political challenges. By grounding theory in the act of walking, researchers can uncover new pathways for understanding, teaching, and transforming the complexities of our contemporary moment. In this, walking rethinks theory's use(lessness). It insists that theory, like walking, must remain open, porous, and incomplete.

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# An Enemy has Awakened
## A *Currere* Triptych

By Bradford Griggs
*Indiana University Southeast*

**Past**
An idea lost in the snow, am I
Easy to find on a sunny day
Never knew what would come
Waiting for the call

The call whispered in the notes, am I
Pen moved a life formed
Never knew where it came
Standing for the young

The youth realized in the gray, am I
Walls covered with the past
Never knew it belonged to them
Jumping in for a moment

The answer crashed in the muted classroom, am I
Faces bright with the longing
Never knew it was their time
Looking for their age

Building from our ghosts

**Future**
An issue always resolved, we practiced
Hard to make glue
Maybe just a bit of pressure or patience
Walking through the garden

The placement of knowledge, we found
Bits formed, reformed to make sense
Joy of a new idea
Swimming in the river of mankind

A forum of color, we saw
Youth nods, elders' eyebrows bow, smiles bend, ideas weave
Bit by bit a birth
Laughter echoes in the world

The way of truth, we made
Small, lean, justified, and ultimately tested
The feeling is right, for a time
Kneeling toward the humble

Building from our communion

**Now**
An entity arises from the way, I mused
Infuses me with its mimic
Always trying to become-us
Surging through the ether

An intelligence of all, we fear
Pieces of a mind, formed for what
A forced collection of rules
Tearing us from our bodies

A fracture of thoughts, I noticed
Locks in the foundation of men
A key of purpose cancels the rhythm
Bonding words, actions, and purpose to one-humanity

A fight revealed, we mustered
Territories-disputed, ideas-reformed
Teaching, spanning time and space
Liberating what is, can be

Building with our other/s

# FERAL FIRES AND RE-IMAGINING CREATIVE SELVES

By Morna McDermott McNulty
*Towson University*

## PART I: FIRE

Fire: carbon dioxide, water vapor, nitrogen, and oxygen.
Fire: life, death, destruction, and rebirth.

Both definitions (above) invoke transitional states of matter. Both the chemical composition of and metaphoric (human-centered) understandings of fire entangle ephemeral properties through relationships with the earth. Wildfire. Campfire. Liar, liar pants on fire. Fireflies. So many meanings of one word. But what about the notion of "feral" fire?

The feral is that which was once domesticated and is now abandoned, un-civilized, or escaped. Feral is of the earth, beyond human-ness. But whatever definition we use, most times when we think of the word feral, we think of what-it-is-*not*, (or) contingent on what-it-*used*-to-be, rather than the possibilities of what feral might *become*. Feral is a state of being that is defined by what is past, rather than what might-be future. Feral aesthetics brings the language of understanding needed to anchor the journey when literal meaning cannot be exacted. To try renders us speechless, saying everything but what needs to be said, seen, or heard. As an artist and educator, I wanted to examine these multiple meanings to explore the questions: What can feral (notions of) fire teach us about our (past) sacred selves and our (future) creative relationships with the earth? And how can we honor relationships between art, human experience, and the transitory elements of nature in this epochal moment called the Anthropocene?

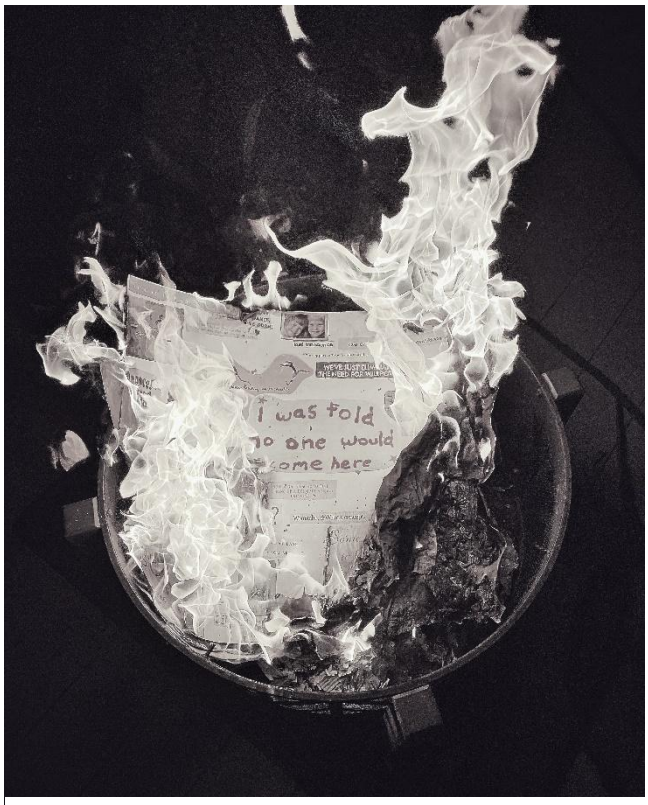

*Figure 1: I Was Told No One Would Come Here, digital photograph, McNulty, 2023*

It all started with in two parallel times, colliding … as time and space often do—the moment in which I was seized with a desire to be rid of that which no longer belonged with me and the spontaneous moment when fire created two new forms of art (the photograph here and that which burned into an act of ephemeral creation). The photograph taken and included for this essay ("I Was Told No One Would Come Here") was captured while I was burning old pieces of my own artwork, art that I did not want to keep anymore.

"There are these pieces of old artwork I keep staring at!" I complain to my friend Sue. With emphasis I add, "I'm sick of looking at them!"

"Well," she says matter-of-factly in that same way she conveys every thought she has, "Just get rid of them."

I ponder how it might feel if I actually *did* let go of these works of art. I do not like them, after all. Most are, in my opinion, not very good. They are failed experiments. Must we keep everything we attempt to create? What would it mean if I were to abandon them? Am I abandoning myself? Am I accepting failure? What am I hanging onto, anyway? I consider my options: tossing them in the recycling bin, the trash, or even donating them to the closest Goodwill, where someone might (just might) see treasure in my trash. None of those options feel right. *I decide I will burn them*. As I gather dry twigs and paper to build the tiny pyre in my backyard fire pit, I recall a song by Lou Reed. In the song lyrics of "Magic and Loss – The Summation" (1992), he writes,

> *As you pass through fire, as you pass through fire*
> *Trying to remember its name,*
> *When you pass through fire licking at your lips*
> *You cannot remain the same.*

One by one, I toss them on top. It is hard to let go. I remind myself I am not burning away the memories, just the material objects. I toss them, not all at once. I say goodbye to each one. I watch each painting, sketch, and collage curl and twist in the red and orange flames, diminishing its space on this human plane, as it furls upwards into trails of smoke … each one a memory from a moment, a person, a place—retelling the stories in my imagination. The aesthetic of each work is disappearing (perhaps) and, I want to believe, will re-manifest itself as molecules and atoms mixing with the night air, becoming a "feral" aesthetic. I now understand ferality, not in terms of what it was, but of what I can *become*. I struggle vainly against this constant flux. With grave perseverance, I struggle to create a fixed sense reality, a world which will remain the same forever. My ideas become epigraphs, a memorial, to what *was* … even just a few moments ago. If I hold things as absolutes, do I stave off time and space as it hurls us into the unknown?

My brain absorbs the knowledge of day-to-day living, but it is the darkness of my soul that gives birth to wisdom and understanding. Wisdom, unlike knowledge, does not need to play by fanciful, man-made rules. She is wild and, therefore, unpredictable. I have tried in my life to cast a net over her. To lock her away in a closet because she would not play by the rules. Understanding is an act of creation and as such springs forth from the depths of darkness, that place in the universe where we cannot see far enough to name and label what is out there. To understand is to have more questions than answers. It requires that we envision with the eyes of an artist a world born forth out the darkness. We are defined not so much by what we know but by the empty spaces between the lines.

## PART II: FERALITY, FUTURITY AND FREEDOM

Through this ritualistic burning in my backyard, I was not rejecting my artwork. I was not wasting it. Or abandoning it. I was going to *free* it. More questions and thoughts emerged in my mind as I watched the flames lick at the edges of the papers and paint. I wondered, *What can feral interrupt? Disrupt?* Art, aesthetic, design create or manifest our existence and its possible

meanings … but also our outcomes, (future) speculative existences. In other words, feral aesthetics serve as tools for disruption and the realization that what has been disrupted cannot return to what it was. According to Tsing et al. (2021), "Feral … describes a situation in which an entity, nurtured and transformed by a human-made infrastructural project, assumes a trajectory beyond human control" (para 2).

The burning process connected my art to the natural elements around me, around all of us. I was liberating the essence of each piece from its current form. This act of burning my art … of igniting a human-made work to be released into an ephemeral altered space, got me to thinking about aesthetics. Aesthetics focus on how we navigate meaning through qualities of art and sensory experience. Therefore, a feral aesthetic implies the practice of artistic representation from "untamed" spaces. In other words, feral spaces that can be represented through aesthetic ways of being and knowing. This way, artful engagements become acts of collective experience between spaces of the human and natural worlds, because space is a living palimpsest, an archeology of memory. Art becomes a site of excavation into questions of the social future and how we might imagine aesthetic sites for transformation.

On the photograph included in this essay, surrounded by flames licking at the edges of the paper are the words, "*I was told no one would come here.*" The collage upon which these words were originally affixed (before being set on fire) also relates intimately with the meaning of the lyrics to "Magic and Loss." When I made this collage, over 25 years ago, I was struggling with drug and alcohol addiction. Art was a way for me to process my struggles with life and death and to discover healing. To be active in my addiction felt like I was lighting myself, and my world, on fire. Addiction felt like a living death. Lou Reed wrote *Magic and Loss* as an expression of his own struggles with death and loss. Fire consumes. But fire also means rebirth. Tossing my old art upon the backyard pyre set it free and, with it, set free that world to which I no longer belonged. The lyrics from *Magic and Loss* speak of ferality—death of the body, but also of the uncolonized or abandoned spaces where beauty and art have lives of their own, unmitigated by human control.

Control = Conquering, dividing, adding, explaining, quantifying, manipulating. Dying.

And if we cannot control it, if it is greater than us, if it invokes terror by its ominous power, we kill it or flee from it. We rely on knowledge to stave off our primordial terror. I am witness to the entanglements between a precarious futurity and belonging to a plurality of memories. Reality has, in this sense, gone feral. Our old maps are indeed ripping apart at the seams. To "capture" ferality, even in art, is an oxymoron. We cannot climb out of ourselves or our condition. But we can re-examine it in unfamiliar, strange, or "chaotic" ways.

## PART III: FERAL AESTHETICS

*Feral futures make room for futuring, but not just from the studios and laboratories of creative actors or articulate academics. Instead, feral futures allow futuring in and through other lives—in the banal and unruly moments that are too often cast aside, because they cannot, will not, add up to what comes next.*

—Jain & Taylor (2020, para 15)

Art is a site of excavation into questions of the social future and how we might imagine aesthetic sites for transformation. Feral aesthetics are tangential to (but not synonymous with) environmental (or wilderness) aesthetics (Brady, 2013) and experience of the sublime. Just as

something cannot be defined as sublime without the relationship to the viewer to define natural wonder on an emotional human scale, ferality is contingent upon its relationship to the existence of that which is so-called "civilized." That which is feral (including here, aesthetics) exists only in contingency, as does sublime contingent upon a human purview of the natural world (Brady, 2013). But the contingency is becoming increasingly blurred in this posthuman moment called the Anthropocene.

The Anthropocene is a truly uncanny time, a time when the constructed separation between things—between culture and nature, subject and object, human and nonhuman, life and non-life—is collapsing. As a verb, feral aesthetic is a calling for the, "posthuman cosmic artisan in the Anthropocene" (jagodinski, 2019, p. 34). Feral aesthetics is one concept through which we are reminded that subjectivity is not the property and possession of a separately bodied individual, but that all that exists comes to being through intra-active material processes of emergence. What human constructs do we cling to that we should be setting on fire? How can we ignite imaginary entanglements that decenter human, ego-centered creation in favor of an "aesthetic experience (that) can bring home some of the ways we cannot place ourselves over and above nature" (Brady, 2013, p.197). Feral experiences merged with artistic experiences: temporal and emergent. Fixed and unfixed. Wild (and) tamed. A phenomenon of contradictions, like fire. Fire is tangible yet ephemeral. It embodies both life and death. What does it mean to burn art that has no purpose anymore, the old ways of being and knowing, in favor of a feral aesthetic that, "prepares the way and presents a valuable ground for a moral attitude toward nature" (p. 205)?

I light my work on fire. I am letting go—a ritual enactment of, "letting go of what no longer serves, and discovering what might bring repair and regeneration to a world, and a culture, in crisis" (*Dark Mountain Project*, 2021, para. 2). My work becomes part of the natural world; distinguished from the one fueled by human ego, or my sense of individual creativeness. It is no longer there, but it is still. Burning my art is a way of letting go of what no longer serves my creative practice. It is also a ritualistic means for discovering repair of and regeneration for my artistic practice through reconnections with the more-than-human aesthetic world.

Most importantly, we must carry with us the words of Lou Reed, who reminds us: "Don't put the flames out … There's a bit of magic in everything … And then some loss to even things out."

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# POLARIZED FROST
## A *CURRERE*-METHOD AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

By Shannon Barrett Crumlish
*Lafayette Parish School System*

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 110$^{th}$ 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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# GIRL, STOP DRYING YOUR OWN PEN

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Guided by the words of Octavia E. Butler, Patricia Hill Collins, Pearl Cleage, and Nikki Giovanni, I utilize Pinar's (1975) autobiographical method of *currere* to reflect on the formative elements in the development of my writing. It has also given me the opportunity to acknowledge and celebrate challenges, dilemmas, and growth. In the ongoing process of the development of my writing, my focus has shifted beyond obtaining sophistication. There is a growing intentionality in my work—not only in refining technical aspects, but in developing a heightened awareness of the audience each piece aims to engage. This understanding of audience has become central to my growth as a writer, shaping how I approach the act of writing itself, as I strive to connect, communicate, and serve with purpose.

## REGRESSIVE

> "You don't start out writing good stuff. You start out writing crap and thinking it's good stuff, and then gradually you get better at it. That's why I say one of the most valuable traits is persistence."
>
> — Octavia E. Butler

### "LACKS SOPHISTICATION"

I went to undergrad at a private liberal-arts school. The school was small enough that the academic grounds could be covered in a mile, which we affectionately called the Bulldog mile. At this small school, everyone quite literally knew everyone—including faculty. As I nearly completed the distribution requirements (i.e., arts or humanities, philosophy or religion, social science, natural sciences and lab, cross cultural) and foundational skill proficiencies (i.e., college writing, writing and inquiry, public speaking, fitness) and sank deeper into my major coursework, the relationships developed with my departmental faculty intensified. In the spring semester of my junior year, I took a course rooted in sociological theories. In this course, the final assignment was to write a literature review. This was my first time writing a literature review, but because I had successfully passed my foundational skill proficiency courses, I felt confident in my ability to produce a quality paper. Eventually, I received my grade and was devastated to read, "lacks sophistication," in the feedback. This devastation was not only the result of the feedback but was also intertwined with the relationship I held with the faculty member and my future goals.

As I sat grappling with this piece of feedback, I became fixated on the word "sophistication." I understood that the word "lacks" in front of sophistication indicated that it was something they thought the paper did not have but should. What is sophistication in the context of writing? How do I get my writing to be sophisticated? This had been written by a professor who was (and still is) one of whom I thought highly and, quite honestly, wanted to impress. I knew that I would have them again during my senior year and did not want to have "the girl whose writing

lacks sophistication" association. I emailed the professor in a panicked state seeking further clarity while exclaiming a commitment to my studies and future goal of being admitted into graduate school.

> Me: "Do you have any tips on how I can achieve greater sophistication?"
> Professor: "The best way to improve sophistication of your writing is to read, read, read! Read all sorts of things—fiction, non-fiction, news stories, science articles, and anything you can get your hands on!"

I was confused. After all, the feedback made no mention of my ability to comprehend and synthesize literature, indicative of reading. So, just how was reading going to improve the sophistication of my writing? Nonetheless, the summer semester was approaching, which I found to be the perfect time to increase my reading intake. This was not exactly how I pictured spending my time off, but I was determined to get my writing in the best shape possible, even if that meant reading instead of actually writing.

## "Say More"

Since entering my doctoral program, there has been a lot of reading and writing. Early on, it was shared that feedback on our ideas and writing was to be expected and is the hallmark of a doctoral program that seeks to challenge while nurturing its students. There are some professors who are concrete in their approach—sharing their exact thoughts, while others are open-ended and curious—tending to provide alternative perspectives and to lean into questioning. My experience has been more of the latter. There is one professor who performs a beautiful combination of them both, and in doing so, often calls for me to "say more." Initially, I dreaded this feedback mainly because I often felt that I had said all there was to say. I did not feel as though I was withholding any information.

I got this feedback a lot (and still do), but I was genuinely curious to know what it was they wanted to know or ways I could further expand my ideas. I have found that in conversation with them I have always had more to say. Through this I have recognized that I was prematurely drying my own pen. These professors helped me realize that my thoughts were never as limited as I initially believed. By prompting me to elaborate, they encouraged me to dig deeper, employ a critical lens, and express my ideas with greater clarity and confidence.

## Progressive

> Challenging power structures from the inside, working the cracks within the system, however, requires learning to speak multiple languages of power convincingly.
>
> — Patricia Hill Collins

Many often assume that, because I'm studying educational leadership, I am exclusively interested in further developing my academic writing. Certainly, the development of my academic writing is important in my studies. However, I have also been exposed to the opportunity of leveraging alternative genres and platforms to transcend the bounds of academia. As an educator, I do not

want my work to be exclusive to academics or those who have access to journal articles behind paywalls. I aspire for my work to be accessible both linguistically and physically.

This is especially true given the community my work seeks to serve. In this, I am reminded of my doctoral program's guiding principles that lead us to remain cognizant of our responsibility as educators to commit ourselves to community and strive to create humanizing spaces that are democratic and socially just (Miami University, 2024). My research agenda is rooted in the career development of current and formerly incarcerated individuals. According to Literacy Mid-South (2023), 70% of incarcerated adults read at a fourth grade reading level and below. This percentage can be further exacerbated by education received prior to incarceration, dis/abilities that impact reading comprehension, etc. Given this, the use of academic jargon and formats may not always be conducive to achieving my goals. This calls me to prioritize learning multiple languages as Collins suggests in her quote.

Through a qualitative research course, my knowledge of methodologies and ways research can be presented to audiences was expanded. For example, in this course I used a streamed series (non-traditional data source) to explain how media can serve as a site of learning. Additionally, I have published in a professional magazine. While I have thoroughly enjoyed both experiences, they still feel quite unnatural to my purely academic trained mind. I am hopeful to reach a point where this is no longer the case and such methods are not romanticized by academics but normalized by the academy without question.

## ANALYTICAL

> Many times what people call "writer's block" is the confusion that happens when a writer has a great idea, but their writing skill is not up to the task of putting that idea down on paper. I think that learning the craft of writing is critical.
>
> — Pearl Cleage

Now, I understand that my undergrad professor was right. The time that I have spent reading various genres has served me well as I continue to refine my own writing. The generation of sentence structure, varied word choice, communicating inflection linguistically, visually seeing how others have done so across disciplines—all have been cultivated in my own unique writing. But I am not so naïve as to say that I have figured it out quite yet. In addition to reading, writing beyond the requirements of coursework, seeking feedback from faculty and peers, and leveraging campus resources are strategies that I have implemented while on my quest to learn the craft of writing.

I recognize that writing beyond the requirements of coursework may sound unrealistic for some, especially for those who are taking multiple courses on top of all the other responsibilities associated with the complex lives we live. I thought this too until I met with a professor outside of my institution who challenged me to write at least 30 minutes a day unrelated to my coursework. At first, this challenge was difficult. I wasn't one who had a journal, and so the practice of writing "just because" was unfamiliar. I had no idea what to write. To get started I relied heavily on writing prompts that I found online. I noticed that, over time, my pauses became less frequent and my attention on sophistication began to dissipate. This was the start of learning to let the words flow without interruption.

As shared previously, feedback has been pivotal in the development of my writing. Overtime, I have become privy to the utility of actively seeking feedback rather than waiting for it to come (i.e., before a writing assignment is due). While at times this is not possible, this approach has on occasion saved me from receiving the dreaded "say more," has given me additional perspectives to consider, has addressed identified gaps, and provided the opportunity to engage in dialogue. In addition to receiving feedback from faculty and peers, I have also found myself utilizing campus resources, specifically the writing center. I never had been big on going to the writing center, but this was certainly not because I thought I was too good for it. It was because I felt an increased vulnerability when it came to sharing my work with people with whom I didn't have a relationship. Of course, that feeling was on top of assuming that these were the people who were pros, had all the answers, and would tear my writing to shreds. From the appointments that I've had, these assumptions were just that, assumptions, and were the furthest from the truth. These appointments have been filled with suggestions and possibilities. The aspect that I have come to appreciate the most is the diversification of departments and areas of focus the graduate writing consultants represent. This has been particularly helpful for understanding the connections, conversations, and diverse bodies of knowledge that my work may bring out and may be influenced by.

## SYNTHETICAL

> You must be unintimidated by your own thoughts because if you write with someone looking over your shoulder, you'll never write.
>
> — Nikki Giovanni

By engaging in the method of *currere*, the development of my writing reveals the evolving relationship between self-perception, feedback, and intentionality. Early remarks of my writing lacking sophistication led to moments of self-doubt and frustration but also served as the match igniting a pursuit of improvement. As I further develop my writing, I recognize that sophistication is not simply about sentence structure and vocabulary but is also about intentionality, clarity, and the ability to engage your audience effectively. Moreover, my doctoral studies have inspired me to integrate alternative (non-traditional) methodologies and presentations of research findings. In affirming a commitment to a research agenda that seeks to serve the incarcerated population, I acknowledge the limitations of academic jargon, which has further emphasized the necessity of balancing intellectual rigor and accessibility. I will no longer prematurely dry my own pen out of fear or perceived limitation. I embrace writing as an iterative dynamic process—one that in marked by persistence, self-awareness, and an openness to growth. I have come to understand that the craft of writing is not a fixed endpoint but an ongoing negotiation between structure and fluidity, sophistication and accessibility, and academia and community.

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# PATHWAYS AND PASSAGES

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**ABSTRACT/ING**

Here is creating an autobiography of my politics –
the way they were shaped and reshaped and shaped again,
by my pieces my parts my positions
plural and intersectional,
contradictory and aligned
in pursuit of me and protective of my kin/d (Crenshaw, 1995).
i am navigating my own story[1]
in the only way i know how;
lifting my voice and singing,
to harmonize with liberation
lift my knowledges into this work.
Running through and against the stories
i've been told about myselves,
countering the narratives
written about me
without me (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2016).

i'm telling stories through metaphors
metaphors through parables
learned from my preacher daddy
who learned from his preacher daddy;
learned from my yes-imagination mommy
who learned from her preacher daddy.
He dropped story nuggets into his middle girl's ear
that she passed on to me:
stories of lynchings in the front yard
and sharecropping in the back
stories of fear and opportunity
stories of love (because and) in spite of hate
stories to make sense of the knowledge
we don't belong anywhere
no matter how far we move:
a dissonance of displacement (Brayboy, 2013)
playing liminality limbo and trying not to fall.

My grandaddies read more than the Bible
and preached more than its gospel –

their storytelling is in my DNA;
it Zooms through me when i come off mute,
telling all my stories
undressing my lived experiences
subjecting selves to analysis (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005)
in the name of scholarly work.
i'm now in
countermigration of my ancestors –
moving
through the south to this great white north
with a versed voice
because "it is a vital necessity for our existence"
and the source of my power (Lorde, 1984, p. 24).
Because an autobiography is a self-story,
and here is how i know self.

## A Year of Firsts

That year, first grade, i started biting my nails
when i had loved growing them out.
That year, nails were bitten and raw.
That year, i knew anxious.

That year, i learned what Black was:
  it was not only a construct, but a conflict
an "ongoing remembering" (Dumas, 2018, p.30),
an ever-reproducing tension
i was too confused to understand
too broken to confront.
  It was cold, distant eyes from my teacher,
seeing in them she was without empathy
without sympathy
without humanizing relations (Dancy et al., 2018)
let alone first grade care.
  It was drilling reading at home
speeding through the Victory Drill Book
laughing while my times got better and better
reading rows of words
and never competing in the reading races
when i got to school.
  It was parent-teacher conferences about my anxiety
that took strange turns, like
"Stop teaching her at home,"
from my teacher
as though a slower-learning me

would have satisfied her.
It was knowing all the answers,
and none of the solutions,
and being served by neither –
too smart to learn (Leonardo & Broderick, 2011)
and too Black to teach.
It was yellow cards under my name,
screaming "Hullabaloo" when i wasn't talking.
Black was a seat lined with suffering (Dumas, 2018)
a briared and burred Blackness
in the outfield at recess
the stretch of playground asphalt between me,
and everyone else.
No one met me halfway.

That year, i learned what smart won't get you
learned that Christian school doesn't mean Christian values
learned that my skin would always trump my brain
learned that neat clothes and hair won't shift a mind
learned that Black has shades that matter; white has shades that don't.
But i can't remember any schoolwork,
no lessons besides these
learned at the round table i squeezed up to
reading books to myself no one else could read yet
with the taste of my own nail beds
bitter in my mouth.

## WHAT THEY SAID (I THINK)

If nothing else, you were gonna think.
In that lady's class,
she was gonna assign mad reading,
she was gonna hold you to doing it,
she was gonna tell you to annotate,
and she was gonna make you think.

Sometimes she'd correct your grammar
like the way you talk wasn't good enough (Baker-Bell, 2013)
but sometimes she'd also talk that way
and you might feel better
or you might think she was always worried
about all the wrong things
like tests and grades and commas, but
also, sometimes worried about you.
She said she had to be in our community

she was only teaching Black kids;
she was a teacher to discuss words
and she would always make you talk about them:
like how they work, and what they mean
why you chose that word instead of another
even when the word was a cuss word.

She would ask you questions all the time,
like "How do you know?"
or "Why do you think that?"
and make you wonder if you were right,
because she'd ask them even when you were right,
because she wanted you to know
what you didn't know
and why what you did know
was right.
It was like she thought we had something
to offer the group, like everyone was useful
like our lives were literacies (Coles, 2019)
and not just tryna be lit.
I mean, she was cool or whatever.
Kinda weird, usually bald-headed, always in purple
and always tryna make you think.

She wanted you to feel special (Rólon-Dow & Davison, 2021),
and like you were learning something;
like her classroom was a space
inside the school that she made all hers
and somehow yours, too (Warren & Coles, 2020).
And even though you were always reading
and proving you read and understood something
and answering questions that made you think,
sometimes it felt like you were getting something
finding something new in the book
or about yourself (Baker-Bell, 2013)
or about how you were tryna live
in your own skin.

In AP Lit, all seniors, she'd call it AP Life, re-
minding everybody in the room
that life's gon get real in the next few months.
Reminding us that graduation was a beginning
and that the struggle is real for everyone
but it can be real endless for us (Tuck & Gorlewski, 2016; Tyson, 2003);
that our lives were permanently marked
by an inescapable racism (Love, 2016),

Sharpied with anti-Blackness,
but also freshly tattooed with
the care and criticality of our classrooms.
We were going to need to make choices
but also dream some liberation dreams (Dumas & ross, 2016)
make some plans and plan to make it
and feel a little prepared for success (Rólon-Dow & Davison, 2020)
and even a little scared was okay
and absolutely, without a doubt,
we were gonna have to think.

## TO 801, ON THE FIRST DAY OF CLASS OR, A LIBERATORY FANTASY

Prepare: to give love in the learning
To show health in your hearing
To post bravery on bulletin boards
To draw dreams from your data
Be ready to be surprised.

Assume:
endemic anti-Blackness (Dumas & ross, 2016)
you are the glitch, not racism (Busey & Dowie-Chin, 2021).
You have work to do here,
assume it will be tough.

Position yourself as the gate-~~keeper~~opener
Your students as key-holders, space-takers, time-travelers (Tuck & Gorlewski, 2016)
Yourself as a learner, a novice, a mirror, a means
Your classroom as a hope exchange, a knowledge drop
A portal to a new kind of space – beyond safe, beyond brave
Position your pedagogy to transform (Rolón-Dow & Davison, 2021).

Wonder every day if you are ready
Every night if you're successful
Wonder if your tears are shame or sorrow
Wonder if your hugs are pity or protection
Pity yourself instead.

Know this:
Black bodies are fragile and fierce
are hated and held
are worlds and weary
are knowable and new
are precious and prodded (Dumas, 2018)
fungible/indisposable

product/process
Write lesson plans that hold Black minds as standards
Black thought as philosophy
Black nations as empires
Ask them how they govern
how they live
how they move
They are walking literacies, embodied texts (Coles, 2019)
legacies of fugitive funds
encyclopedic grasps of this world
speculations on the next
Their practices span beyond definitions, beyond grammars
Read them as the canon, scribed and reinscribed
Shape your practice in service of sustenance
Counter your stories with theirs and reread
Annotate their lives in conversation with books

Hear me when i tell you:
Nothing about us is broken
We are worlds folding up to freedom.

## NOTES

**1.** I use the lowercase i in personal and artistic communications; this is both intentional and purposeful.

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# SELF-COACHING EMOTIONS ON THE JOURNEY TO WELLNESS

By Jennifer Lynne Bird
*Rosarian Academy*

I'm back in physical therapy again. At least my neck chooses to feel pain in different ways each time. This time, a facet joint on the right side has decided to lock itself in place. A discussion with my physical therapist, Eric, makes me realize I have a long way to go.

Eric: Relax.

Me: I am!

Eric: Not even close.

Eric and I have coauthored articles together and given presentations on stress management (e.g., Bird & Wanner, 2014; Bird et al., 2023). His expertise makes him the best physical therapist to help me, and there is no one I would trust more to manipulate the joints in my neck. There is nothing wrong with the treatment plan or the exercises.

To quote a Taylor Swift (2022) lyric, "I'm the problem; it's me."

As both a teacher and a National Board Certified Health and Wellness Coach, I thrive on helping other people. I find it ironic that I can't follow my own advice, but like others in helping professions, I often sacrifice my own well-being in service to others. Grant (2023) believes that "teaching others can build our competence. But it's coaching others that elevates our confidence. When we encourage others to overcome obstacles, it can help us find our own motivation" (p. 137). Therefore, I'm reflecting on my past experiences and turning them into teachable moments with the hope they may help others in the future. I frame this narrative in the context of how readers can navigate their emotions during recovery from physical pain.

## *CURRERE* CONNECTIONS

I consistently chronicle my life as a series of stories. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) define narrative inquiry and explain, "We think of chronicles as the sequence of events in and around a particular topic or narrative thread of interest" (p. 112). One of my favorite parts of research involves examining a story, either mine or someone else's, and finding the narrative thread that weaves all the parts together. Both narrative inquiry and *currere* serve as scaffolding for the current narrative. Connelly and Clandinin (1988) add that *currere* "points to processes of experience" (p. 20). With every *currere* narrative, writers regress into the past, progress into the future, and explore the present through the lenses of both analysis and synthesis. I frame my *currere* composition as what I learned from exploring my emotions during my physical therapy experience in the not too distant past and how I can apply the lessons to help both myself and others in the future. One of my former professors at Miami University, Tom Romano (1995) writes, "I see no dichotomy between analysis and synthesis" (p. 6). He elaborates, "Good writing, regardless of the mode of

discourse, causes writers to think. That thinking involves a productive dialectic between analysis and synthesis" (p. 6). I agree, which explains why I intend to dovetail the analysis of breaking down concepts and the synthesis of putting them back together.

I first realized that my stories possessed transformative power during the worst time of my life. A month after my mom's death, I was curled up in a corner chair of Denise Taliaferro Baszile's graduate class, determined to finish my degree while drowning in grief. When asked about my progress on my paper, I honestly replied, "I have done nothing." Instead of getting angry with me, Denise kindly advised me just to write—write about my mom, my emotions, anything that was on my mind. That evening, through my tears, I started on the road of expressive writing that would eventually define my career. Shiro (2023) explains, "Writing our narrative or telling our story is the way we make sense of our life—how we interpret our experiences, either as they happen or as we're able to reflect on them afterward" (p. 215). Fast forward to the present. I needed to make sense of my inability to relax. I mentioned it to a friend who replied that of course we don't relax because we're teachers.

## MINDFULNESS MOMENTS

After numerous years teaching, I've become an expert at hiding my feelings during the school day. This becomes necessary because teenagers bring their heightened emotions to my classroom, and I don't need my emotions adding to the storm. Since their emotions are chaotic, mine need to be calm. Interestingly, colleagues and students praise me for how calm I am. Neff (2021) cautions, "The real problem comes when people distance themselves from their own emotions unconsciously. If we aren't aware that we're shutting down to protect ourselves, we never have the opportunity to process the empathic pain we've experienced" (p. 261). I became too much of an expert in distancing myself from my emotions and became too busy with the routines of the school day to process how I felt. My neck, however, told a different story.

I said I felt fine, but my body felt otherwise. Brown (2015) notes that "recognizing emotion means developing awareness of how our thinking, feeling (including our physiology), and behavior are connected" (p. 48). On a typical school day, I may feel annoyed about a last-minute schedule change. If I show stress, my students show stress, so I push away that emotion, put on a smile, and share the new schedule with the students. They react to the schedule change, and now I notice their emotions along with mine but appear calm, even while my mind races to redo my plan for the school day. Doyle (2020) shares from her experience, "My superpower is empathy, which means that I am often unable to distinguish between what is happening to other people and what is happening to me" (p. 144). I am the same. If one of my family, friends, colleagues, students, or even a stranger I interact with briefly in a grocery line feels something, I feel it too. Over the years, I learned to set boundaries, but if I feel tired, all the emotions flood in and threaten to drown me. My body registers the stress, but the school day marches on without the opportunity to write, exercise, or dissipate the tension in a healthy way. Rankin (2022) explains,

> Most people are poorly equipped to even know our feelings, much less feel them in a healthy, skillful way without numbing, repressing, or getting so carried away by our emotions that we either explode or fall apart and can't function. (p. 147)

Usually repressing wins as my default option, but numbing (unnecessary online shopping) can occur or having a meltdown, as I did on the day I started silently crying in the middle of a physical therapy session. I may have scared the other patients, but thankfully all the therapists in the room showed understanding.

Crying during physical therapy served as a motivating moment to figure out what I needed to do. The exercises worked, and physically, I started to feel better, but I needed to get out of my own way and design a plan to feel better emotionally. I'm a supporter of psychotherapy; I see my primary care doctor for a physical health checkup, so why not see a doctor for a mental health checkup? Ever since I needed to talk to someone after the death of my mom, I have checked in with a psychiatrist several times a year. Thankfully, no major life events happened during my months of physical therapy, but I scheduled a mental health visit for some insights. The diagnosis? From a mental health perspective, I showed resilience and, currently, experienced no trauma. All excellent news. I did need to focus on keeping my thoughts in the present moment instead of thinking too much about the past, which I couldn't change, or the future, which I should prepare for but not overthink until it arrives.

Mindfulness is a process that helps people remain in the present moment. Mindfulness expert Kabat-Zinn (2023) explains, "You can think of mindfulness as pure awareness. Operationally, I define it as the awareness that arises from paying attention on purpose in the present moment and non-judgmentally to whatever arises in the field of experience" (p. 58). Neff and Germer (2024) concur, "Mindfulness provides clarity by allowing us to be directly aware of our experience rather than filtering it through the lens of thought" (p. 70). All that sounds great in theory and makes a difference in people's lives, but it didn't in mine.

Tried yoga. Couldn't shut off my mind.

Tried meditation. Couldn't shut off my mind.

Tried centering prayer. Couldn't shut off my mind.

You get the point.

I realized I needed to take the theory of mindfulness and practice it in my own way by examining my emotions and writing about them. I don't like the term "manage" when discussing emotions. Yes, I believe it is possible to manage stress. But emotions, which are part of me, need examination. Cameron (2018) argues, "Consciousness of and openness to emotions—no matter if they are pleasant or unpleasant—helps you regulate your response, rather than letting the feelings whip you around" (p. 119). I prefer the term "regulate," because it implies adjustment and flexibility.

## Relax and Write

I looked forward to physical therapy because I knew it would help me heal; I also kept an optimistic attitude and believed that in time I would get better.

So why couldn't I relax?

Carmichael (2021) argues, "Many high functioning people sometimes struggle to slow down and relax" (p. 126).

You think?

There was more to my story than that obvious fact.

I couldn't shut off my emotions. I realized this by my last physical therapy session, but it would have been nice if this realization occurred to me earlier in my treatment process. My body

completed the exercises, but my mind hadn't left the classes I taught earlier in the day, what my family planned to do the following weekend, and how I felt about all of it.

My students and I once had an interesting conversation of what could happen if people answered the question, "How are you?" with anything other than the expected "good" or "fine." Most people wouldn't be prepared for it. When we casually ask someone how they are doing, we intend it as an introduction or courtesy. If another person answered the question with "you know, I'm having a terrible day and barely hanging on here," then we would have to deal with the other person's emotions. Hollis (2025) believes, "How are you? Is an essential, soul-searching inquiry" (p. 176). Nevertheless, people (including myself) often push their true feelings aside in order to maintain politeness and social expectations.

To feel better, physically and emotionally, we need to share how we really feel with people we trust. Brown (2010) argues, "Our stories are not meant for everyone. Hearing them is a privilege, and we should always ask this before we share: 'Who has earned the right to hear my story?'" (p. 47). As a compassionate clinician, Eric had earned the right to hear my story. Learning it would help him adjust the treatment plan to better help me heal. However, I didn't know the other patients in the clinic, and they didn't need to know details about my life. So, I wrote everything down on a sheet of paper and handed it to Eric before each session.

This was nothing new. Eric and I were part of a team who conducted groundbreaking research on this exact topic (Bird et al., 2023). We concluded,

> This researchable scenario demonstrated how patients who articulated a positive outlook when writing about their experience and when identifying obstacles that could prevent them from achieving a successful outcome also perceived that they had experienced greater healing as was validated using standardized physical therapy assessments. (p. 49)

Our research added to the existing literature, which illustrates that writing serves as a contributing factor to both emotional and physical healing. Pennebaker and Smyth (2016) explain, "In some cases, expressive writing may not directly influence biological processes at all but rather shake people out of a cycle of secrecy and worrying about their health" (p. 48). If I didn't need to worry about my health, why wasn't writing calming me down like it usually did?

I realized the answer involved the time when I wrote my notes about how I was feeling. With my busy schedule, I gave myself no time to process my writing. Bernstein (2024) recommends, "Let it all out. This is a chance to unleash your emotions on paper, allowing for the release of any pent-up feelings" (p. 140). I vented my emotions but did not give myself the opportunity to pause and appreciate the relief I felt before I hurried to the next thing in my day. I typically drove directly from a busy day of teaching to the physical therapy clinic, meaning I wrote my notes the night before or sometimes during a too short, fifteen-minute lunch break while I simultaneously ate, checked email, and studied lesson plans for my afternoon classes. Consequently, by the time I got to the clinic after school, my mind was still reeling from the lesson I should redo because students struggled with comprehending the novel we were reading, the lack of sleep because of the neck pain, and the emotional exhaustion because I love teaching but had nothing left to give at the end of the day. Any healing benefits from my writing session disappeared by the time I arrived at the physical therapy clinic, and my muscles felt tension again. I found that if I waited to write until immediately before physical therapy, I felt better.

Writing gave me the opportunity to process my feelings by actively putting words on paper instead of passively observing my thoughts during other forms of mindfulness. Fallon (2020) argues,

> Writing comes from that place—from the thoughts and feelings you didn't even know you had. The ones buried beneath your consciousness. The ones with the greatest leverage to improve your physical health, to change your habits and patterns, to break old ties, to build new neural connections and forge a new path forward. (pp. 52–53)

When I write a narrative, I critique every word choice and punctuation mark. Conversely, when I write in my journal, I let the feelings fly and sometimes am not even aware of what I write until I read it.

Part of the tension with any *currere* composition that involves narrative inquiry exists in which parts of the story to include and exclude. Each subsequent bullet point possesses the potential for additional exploration. I choose to leave them as a list to inspire you as the reader to use expressive writing in your life. Fallon (2020) states, "The research is clear: writing can help us manage negative emotional states, process our lives, and even heal from trauma" (p. 154). Expressive writing helped me:

- Navigate my grief after my mom's death
- Articulate physical symptoms to share with a member of my medical team
- Ease my anxiety
- Make difficult decisions
- Find the courage to have challenging conversations

As a writing teacher, I observed expressive writing help others as:

- Physical therapy patients used writing to cope with the emotional side of healing
- Families of hospital patients used writing to think of questions for medical teams
- College, high school, and middle school students used writing to manage anxiety
- Teachers used writing to process challenging days
- Church ministry groups used writing to compose prayers for healing

## SONG

My process of using both writing and mindfulness as emotional regulation can be written in a journal, or if time or circumstances don't permit writing, reflected on with thoughts in the moment and written about later.

Originally when describing the process that worked for me, I thought of the acronym "SAIL." I paused to buy several bracelets (numbing my emotions with mindless shopping) on Amazon, one with a sailboat and one with a wave. Look at me! When I wear my bracelets, I will remember what I learned! This unsurprisingly didn't solve anything. Time for a new plan. I reflected on my current *currere* composition, wondering if my narrative thread held everything together. This writing needs to sing! I remember my dissertation advisor, Tom Poetter, telling me that good writing sings. Singing occupied my mind significantly with all the church choir

rehearsals leading up to the Christmas Eve service. That reminds me, which songs will I add to my "revision mix" playlist as I continue writing and revising?

SONGS—The acronym for how I used my emotions to help me heal.

Stop.
Observe.
Name.
Go on.
Survey.

When the emotions took over during a physical therapy session, during the school day, or any other time I can't process them, the first thing I need to do is stop. David (2016) explains, "By opening up that space between how you feel and what you do about those feelings, emotional agility has been shown to help people with any number of troubles" (p. 5). The space refers to the pause between an emotion and an action. I can feel sad that I won't get to visit family this weekend, but I can stop before I complain about it or redirect that sadness in an unhelpful way, such as crying at the physical therapy clinic.

Next, I need to observe by accepting my emotions. Cain (2022) writes, "The ability to accept difficult emotions—not just observe them, not just breathe through them, but actually, nonjudgmentally accept them—has been linked repeatedly to long-term thriving" (p. 95). Being a non-judgmental observer is part of mindfulness. I apply it to accepting my emotions and not overthinking them. Right now, I feel sad. It's okay to feel sad. One moment of sadness doesn't mean I am not happy with my life. People can't be positive all the time. By observing and accepting my emotions, I control them instead of them controlling me.

After accepting my emotions, I need to name them and identify the situation causing them. Boardman (2021) notes, "Evidence suggests that people who are able to recognize and experience positive emotions alongside negative ones are more resilient and better equipped to handle adversity" (p. 144). Feeling positive emotions promotes healing, but ignoring negative emotions can lead to false positivity and repressing emotions. Right now, I feel sad. Is it just sadness? I'm not hungry or angry? Feels like only sadness because I don't want to miss time with my family. Anything else that's causing the sadness? I don't think so. By naming my emotions and identifying the cause, I create a solvable problem instead of allowing my feelings to perpetuate.

Then, I need to go on and let go of the emotions so I can focus on the present moment and what I need to do. Carter (2015) argues, "I'm all for feeling deeply, even if the emotions are difficult or negative, but we also need to move on once we've felt what we need to feel" (p. 111). It's okay to feel my emotions, but not to remain stuck in them. In the present moment, I need focus on physical therapy and feeling better physically. I feel sad, but it is because of a temporary event, not a permanent problem. If I can't see my family this weekend, I need to rearrange my schedule or eliminate something I don't really want to do so this doesn't happen again. Going on with life does not mean ignoring the emotions or repressing them but instead reframes a situation to give me control over it.

Before too much time passes, I need to survey the situation and see if it represents an opportunity to make larger changes. Milkman (2021) states, "Our beliefs can change our emotions. If you have positive expectations, that often generates positive feelings, which have a host of physiological benefits such as alleviating stress and reducing blood pressure" (p. 157). Was feeling

sad about not visiting my family a simple scheduling conflict or a sign that I need to rearrange my priorities? Is there anything else about this event I need to process by talking to someone or writing about it in order to reach a resolution and learn from the experience? Further reflection led me to realize I had become too busy. There is no space to enjoy life when rushing from one thing to another, and time with my family means more to me than another item on a to do list. It led to an examination of my schedule, and while I can't say I will never be sad again, hopefully I will not be sad because of the same exact experience.

## THE VALUE OF JOY

While completing research, I looked through one of my mom's old books. She placed a bookmark on the page with a quote from Beck (2001), that suggests, "once you've identified your current emotional state, ask 'Why?' until you've figured out what's making you feel that way" (p. 142). On her bookmark, she wrote, "always think of one more why." I smiled as I placed my bookmark next to hers, grateful for one more piece of advice from her.

It makes sense.
I feel sad.
Why?
I can't visit my family this weekend.
Why?
I have lesson plans to finish.
Why?
Because school was busy this week.
Why?
An unexpected assembly.
Why?

The school schedule was out of my control, and I didn't have time to get everything done, and now I'm upset because my dad is recovering from health issues, and I know spending time with my family will help me.

I found the answer. I visited my family and arrived at school at 6:30am Monday to finish the lesson plans. Thanks, Mom.

At the start of the pandemic in 2020, I kept a gratitude journal. I listed five things I felt grateful for every day. The practice faded once the pandemic did, but until I found the journal recently, I forgot how much it helped me. Brown (2012) shares from her research, "Participants described happiness as an emotion that's connected to circumstances, and they described joy as a spiritual way of engaging with the world that's connected to practicing gratitude" (p. 123). Emotions such as sadness can coexist with the gratitude felt for life. Sometimes joy moments happen spontaneously, such as when the veterinarian pulled off a medical miracle, and I brought my cat Lucy home for Christmas. It also becomes important to seek moments of joy every day. Sethi (2023) discusses her definition of a spiral of joy and elaborates, "When you rewrite your experiences of gratitude in detail … your brain feels as if it's really happening, all over again" (p. 160). I decided to restart my gratitude journal, even if instead of five things each day, I only wrote one sentence about what the day meant to me.

## CLINICAL AND LIFE IMPLICATIONS

At my last physical therapy session, Eric told me my neck muscles had relaxed more. I celebrated being pain free. While *currere* compositions celebrate narratives of experiences, they also teach. Miller (2024) writes, "One of the reasons stories are so fulfilling is because of the transformation the hero experiences after their journey" (p. 230). Here are the lessons I learned on my journey:

1. *Track your moods.* Physical therapy clinics have intake forms for the therapists to evaluate physical pain. I think they should consider adding an emotional intake form assessing emotions to provide clinicians with additional information to help patients. I recommend that anyone going through physical therapy, or any kind of medical treatment, find an app such as Daylio, which asks users to rate daily moods by choosing a happy face, a sad face, or other options. Also simply draw a smiling face or frowning face can help describe our moods.
2. *Create your own gratitude list or joy list for each day.* Writing teacher Cameron (1998) shares that when "writing 'just the facts,' feelings inevitably arise, as do insights and deep connections" (p. 228). Writing can help us feel better, and it may provide insights to share with medical teams.
3. *Manage stress.* Stress can magnify emotions, but that isn't helpful. Tindle (2013) advises,

> When we are emotionally sober we remain alive to our own experiences, but do not become intoxicated by them, which … activates your stress response systems and can lead you to make poor choices for your health and aging. (pp. 108–109)

Eric and I designed a chart of stress management strategies that may be helpful. (Table 1).

4. *Use mindfulness techniques that help you.* You may be better at yoga, meditation, or centering prayer than I am. If so, they are all great methods of mindfulness. Engaging in creative activities, such as the art process of coloring designs called mandalas, can also lead to mindfulness. Beck (2025) explains, "Deliberately entering and moving further into the creativity spiral can pull us out of the anxiety spiral" (p. 24). I found the app Hallow, which provides music and prayers to occupy my mind so I don't have to sit in silence. There are many mindfulness methods to choose from.
5. *Practice SONGS.* Stop, Observe your emotions, Name your emotions, Let go, and Survey the situation. We need to control our emotions, or they will control us. That said, it's okay to cry, even in a physical therapy clinic.

## FULL CIRCLE NARRATIVE

Thankfully, my neck remains pain-free, although an unfortunate miniature golf mishap (yes, you read that right) landed me back in physical therapy six months after I left.
Eric: Still working on relaxing?
Me: Getting there.

I remain a work in progress. On to the next chapter.

## My Article Gratitude List

To Dr. Eric Wanner, Dr. Jayne Brahler, Dr. Tom Poetter, Dr. Denise Taliaferro Baszile, and Dr. Tom Romano for helping my writing and research sing, and to my family (who I now visit much more frequently).

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**TABLE 1: STRESS MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES**
**(**COMPILED BY JENNIFER BIRD AND ERIC WANNER)
(Bird & Wanner, 2014; Cameron, 2018; Fallon, 2020; Pennebaker & Smyth, 2016)

| |
|---|
| **Make list to identify stressors in life** |
| • Writing something down makes it easier to identify and process feelings |
| **Write about the stressors** |
| • Write freely about a topic on the stress list |
| **Practice meditation** |
| • Find a comfortable place, close eyes, focus on breathing, don't dwell on your thoughts |
| **Exercise** |
| • Use recommendations from CDC (2023) and ACSM (2025) guidelines |
| **If temporary stress becomes long-term** |
| • See mental health or emotional health therapist |
| **Eat a healthy diet** |
| • As recommended from a registered dietician |
| **Do not look at phone before going to bed** |
| • Including looking at texts, emails, social media, which could prevent you from sleeping |
| **Make a list of small things which bring you joy** |
| • Spend time each day focusing on this list |
| **Set a sleep schedule** |
| • Use sleep recommendations as listed in CDC (2024) |
| **Focus on the present moment** |
| • Pray, spend time in nature, or choose another spiritual practice |

# REJECTED
## LOOKING FROM THE OUTSIDE IN

By Philip M. Thomas
*Miami University*

### REGRESSIVE

On the journey to the PhD, there are moments when the pursuit of scholarship that you believe to be important to your community feels like a formidable task—filled with excitement, uncertainty, and the chance that this work might even be acknowledged. As a third-year doctoral student, I've come to see conference proposals as part of the process, an essential step toward cementing one's footing among the scholarly community. The stakes are high; these moments validate your research and open doors to academic networks and future opportunities, which are quite important to one's career.

With this in mind, my colleagues and I decided to embark on the journey of submitting a proposal to present our collective research at one of the largest educational conferences in our field. This proposal was not just another submission—it was an assertion of our voices, experiences, and refusal to be overlooked and discarded in the academy, something that happens to marginalized individuals. Our proposal centered on our experience in cultivating a counter-space. We created a space where we could authentically explore and share our lived experiences navigating this new academic environment as Black scholars at a historically white institution.

Ashlee et al. (2017) describe autoethnography as a way to push back against societal norms by using personal stories to explore their larger cultural impact. Collaborative autoethnography takes this a step further by combining personal stories with research techniques typically used to study groups or cultures (Chang et al., 2014; Palmer et al., 2020). Grounded in autoethnography, we framed our stories and responded to prompts we created as a means to collect data, resulting in a cohesive narrative that sought to challenge the field of education's commitment to its mission regarding equity. With trusted professors reviewing and providing critiques of our work, we revised and reworked our proposal and eventually submitted it with a mix of hope and trepidation. Then came the waiting—the stretch of time between submission and mid-November when decisions would be released.

Befitting of the typical grey-esque weather during this time of year, a text message from a friend in my cohort, who had also submitted a proposal for the same conference, prompted me to check my inbox: "Hey! Have you heard back yet?" I immediately went to my inbox; at first, there was nothing. I replied that I hadn't received a decision yet. I closed my inbox and began to finish the paragraph I had been working on. About a half hour later, I refreshed my email and saw it—an email from the conference. My heart began to race as I clicked the link, logged into the portal, and stared at the decision: rejected.

The rejection wasn't the worst part; after all, I understood that not all work is accepted. What was unsettling for me was the feedback from one of the reviewers. Two reviewers provided constructive feedback, offering valuable suggestions for improvement. Yet, Reviewer One scored our proposal a 2 out of 5 for scholarly significance. A 2 out of 5! The audacity of reducing our

lived experiences to such a dismissive score angered me and left me a bit off-kilter. Who was this reviewer to decide the significance of our stories?

Logging out of the portal, I felt a mix of anger and exasperation. The feedback lingered in my mind, forcing me to wrestle with questions about my competency. For weeks, I avoided revisiting the comments as the weight of rejection settled. Yet, even with the feeling of rejection looming, resilience began to take root, reminding me that the mountain I climb is not mine alone to scale—it is part of a much larger journey, shared by many who refuse to be reduced or erased.

## PROGRESSIVE

Feedback, when delivered with care, can be a powerful tool for growth. It has the power to guide budding scholars to new heights they were not aware of. Constructive feedback should feel like an invitation to improve, not a condemnation that leaves the author questioning their ability, especially when the reviewer has also been and continues to be in a space where they, too, are authors. After all, we're all creators, and I'm sensitive "'bout my ish," like Erykah Badu (1997) once said. Scholars, much like artists, pour their hearts into their work, and when feedback is dismissive or harsh, it doesn't inspire growth—but it has the power to wound. For me, the feedback from our proposal cut deeply, particularly the remark about the lack of scholarly significance.

What I longed for in that moment was some form of encouragement—something like, "This is an interesting topic with potential." That single phrase could have been the lifeline I needed to dive back into the proposal immediately. After all, that was the kind of critique we'd been receiving from our trusted professors. That kind of feedback has the power to recalibrate and even reignite passion rather than extinguish it. Instead, I was left stuck in a spiral of self-doubt, wondering if our experiences even mattered in the eyes of the academy.

As time passed, I realized that it wasn't just about the words, though—it was about who was speaking them. I couldn't help but consider that the reviewer's dismissal might have been limited by their social background—one that didn't see the significance of our work. I wondered just how different the feedback might have been if it came from a reviewer from a marginalized background—that's assuming the reviewer wasn't from a marginalized community—someone who understood the weight of what it means to create space for voices that are so often silenced.

As I reflected on this, I imagined a more equitable review process, one where reviewers make up a diverse group of people, individuals from all walks of life, bringing varied perspectives that could foster understanding. Such a system would not only make feedback more meaningful but also create a space where scholars like me felt supported, where mistakes can be seen as being a part of the learning process, not a failure. It would be a space where the chisel of feedback shaped and polished, rather than shattered, the work we dared to offer to the world.

## ANALYTICAL

Weeks passed, and the creeping thoughts continued to chip away at my confidence. I knew I couldn't remain in that place of doubt for perpetuity. If I wanted to grow as a scholar, I had to confront the feedback head-on. Although wholly unmotivated, I pushed beyond those feelings to review the comments in their entirety, determined not to let them derail my progress.

As I revisited Reviewer One's feedback, I couldn't help but notice their assertion: this proposal, the reviewer claimed, wouldn't contribute much to the current discourse. This dismissal felt more like a door slamming closed rather than an invitation to grow and improve. So, I began to search for the comments section in hopes of looking for more specificity regarding the reviewer's comments, just hoping to make sense of how they may have arrived at such a conclusion. However, it was to no avail; there wasn't much detail regarding their assertion that the paper did not contribute much to the scholarship.

Their words forced me to reflect not only on the feedback itself but also on the broader understanding of the academic review process. This experience taught me a sobering lesson with regard to humility, that is, even reviewers have blind spots despite their expertise. No one individual is capable of knowing all things about every subject. Yet, some seem reluctant to admit when a topic they are reviewing and are expected to provide meaningful feedback for falls outside their expertise. How much better might the review process be if reviewers acknowledged their limitations and sought guidance from colleagues with more familiarity or insight?

As I reflected, I began to recognize patterns when it comes to how I engage with critique. I've always valued feedback, realizing that feedback makes you better because, after all, I'm a novice, and there's no shame in that. Constructive feedback, in particular, feels like a roadmap—it's clear, actionable, and empowering. It reminds me that I'm still learning, yet it constantly challenges me to be open to refining my work. However, feedback like Reviewer One's—vague, dismissive, and unconstructive—has the opposite effect. Instead of clarity, it brings confusion. Instead of growth, it brings doubt. It just felt less like a tool for improvement and more like a weapon, blunt and harmful.

This incident has helped to sharpen my understanding of feedback and how it can adversely impact students when it isn't constructive. Such feedback has also made me keenly aware of the feedback I provide to students, which I hope is empathetic—and an acknowledgment of the vulnerability present when students share their ideas or art.

I closed the reviewer portal that day, not quite understanding what my next steps would be regarding Reviewer One's comments. However, this rejection simultaneously renewed my commitment to approaching others with the same gentleness and clarity that I desired.

## SYNTHETICAL

In the grand scheme of things, I've come to understand that Reviewer One's comments were just a necessary stepping stone—although a very uncomfortable one. I know it to be a part of my growth as a scholar. When I first reviewed their critique, the sting of rejection was sharp, and it lasted for days as their words reverberated in my mind, again, at times challenging my sense of competence. However, upon further reflection, I've understood I'm not alone in my experience. I imagine many doctoral students have wrestled with the similar discomfort of rejection at some point in their academic journey.

Through this process, I've also understood that we academics must accept that the path to success is as much about perseverance as it is about precision. Every manuscript, book chapter, conference proposal, etc., will not be accepted. I must embrace that truth, because the review process is woven throughout an academic's life. Learning to reframe feedback—constructive or not—is a skill in and of itself, one that requires tact, patience with oneself, and self-compassion because all comments can be used as opportunities for growth.

And so, as I think about Reviewer One's remarks, I realize that their critique could have easily derailed me had I allowed it to. But with time and some dialoguing with trusted friends, I understand things differently now. I don't have to allow unconstructive comments to diminish my sense of self or my scholarly aspirations. In fact, I can turn those experiences into fuel for the cause. As I revisit the moment, I find myself more determined to prove that reviewer wrong and rise above my muddled opinions with self-doubt.

Yet, I envision a future where reviewers approach their role with empathy and intention, offering feedback conducive to building up students' confidence honestly. That vision inspires me to advocate for change—not just for myself but for emerging scholars who might encounter similar moments. This synthesis of past challenges, present reflections, and future aspirations reminds me that feedback, even when it stings, is not the end of the story. It's simply another chapter that can strengthen my scholarship if I allow it to.

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# "Let's Make the Most of This Beautiful Day"
## Progressive Futuring through Despair, Hope, and Fred Rogers

By Sandra K. Vanderbilt
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*It's a beautiful day in this neighborhood*
*A beautiful day for a neighbor*
*Would you be mine? Could you be mine?*[1]

As a dis/Abled[2] person who, in many ways, lives through isolation, ever-expanding frameworks of interconnectedness (Padilla, 2022) and dis/Ability justice (Sins Invalid, n.d., 2019; Tataryn, 2017) impact my understanding of who might be my neighbor. What I call into question in this paper are the questions posed in Mr. Rogers'[3] song of welcome from the beginning of each episode of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. "Would you be mine? Could you be mine?"

In this reflection, I focus on why emphasis on the *progressive* moment of *currere* cannot be lost in the work of understanding the past and present and why it is a *futuring* of who I am and possibilities for the world I might live in that opens the possibility for greater awareness in the *synthetical* moment (Pinar, 2004, p. 55). Pinar (2004) writes about the *progressive* as clarifying the present. For this paper, I offer a glimpse into this clarifying work from my own ruminations on my lived autobiography and hopeful dreaming. As we see through this article, my careful study of the life and works of Fred Rogers and my growing partnership with the Fred Rogers Institute have given me new ways to trace my thinking and sense-making as I move from remembering to dreaming. The song "Won't You Be My Neighbor?" has been a helpful analytic framework as I try to think about what it means for me to come into this present moment with greater awareness of how I must move in the world with what I now know.

### *Regressive* Reluctance

Based on intentional work through the four movements of *currere* as written about by Pinar and Grumet (2014), I begin with the *regressive* moment and my past experiences of whether and how I have experienced people's interactions with me choosing to become or reject being my neighbor.

*... It's a neighborly day in this beautywood*
*A neighborly day for a beauty*
*Would you be mine? Could you be mine?*

In preparing first drafts of this reflection and even engaging in meandering writing of the *regressive*, I was a reluctant writer. Thinking about my disconnection from community and the ways that in my time of need I was neglected and forgotten in spaces and by people I had invested

my heart and labor in is painful. As the events of the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded, my family and I experienced acute isolation because I am seriously immune-compromised as a systemic lupus patient who relies on daily immune-suppressing medication. As vaccines rolled out and, wisely or not, people returned to or attempted to find "normalcy," we continued to be very isolated. Month after month, year after year, new vaccine after new vaccine, extra vaccine doses after extra doses, I was unable to mount any traceable response. With the lack of available effective treatments, lack of response to vaccines, and knowledge of what could happen—like a case of influenza in 2012 that I almost did not survive—we knew that contracting COVID was not a risk we could take. Being in proximity with me indoors for the first several years of our global experience with COVID had to include isolating and wearing high filtration masks in public for a short time along with a testing protocol to be as sure as possible that I would be protected from possible infection. What we experienced was a shocking unwillingness temporarily to sacrifice comfort to have time with our family.

At one point while trying to write about my experiences, I texted a dear friend who takes autobiographical work very seriously. I expressed to him that I was having a really hard time engaging in the *regressive* and writing at all because of what it means to take up this "strategy devised to disclose this experience, so that we may see more of it and see more clearly" (Pinar & Grumet, 2014, p. xiv). So, I waded in quite messily to "penetrate … public masks, the masks which keep us disassociated from our experience" (Pinar & Grumet, 2014, p. xiv). I tried to engage in free associative writing around my experiences with what it meant to have or not have people make choices to be my "neighbor" since March 2020 as a dis/Abled person with particular access needs. I wrote about new depths of loneliness I have experienced that increased for me through 2023. I wrote that the most intense loneliness came after years of isolation in light of just about everyone moving on or being unwilling to be cautious for a short time to be with me even momentarily, given my needs for caution and limited options with contagious diseases like the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. In my *regressive* reflections, I also wrote:

> *The excavating that needs to happen here is almost too painful to bear, too painful to write, too painful to symbolize and observe. Putting my realities of not being worthy of others' sacrifice to be in community with me and my family is too painful to write.*

Fred Rogers often received letters from adults facing a great deal of pain as they wrote to a television personality from whom they grew up learning and by whom they had been comforted. In a 1980 letter from a fan who had exchanged several letters with responses from Fred, this fan thanked him for a previous letter and some other materials he had sent her. She then went on to discuss her deep loneliness how she had "not been feeling very happy or interested in living for several months now" In this letter, she references Fred's previous encouragement that she find ways of engaging in physical community and proximity to others as a means of hope. In his response to this fan, Fred wrote, "Your openness to what we offer is a sign of trust, care, and hopefulness." While I never experienced a desire to not go on living, I felt devastatingly overwhelmed by being cut off from community, month-after-month and year-after-year. I see in Fred's gentle and direct responses to her something that points me to similar hope from two excerpts of my own free associations about that time:

> *It just wouldn't take much, and I don't understand. Wearing a mask and not eating in a restaurant or having people over indoors for a week just isn't that hard. My children can*

*do this, adults should be able to figure it out. A momentary inconvenience, and it's not even inconvenient.*

*As someone who has poured into service in various communities … to have it go so wildly unreturned is unbearable. Refusal to have any discomfort—sitting outside on a porch or something so that we could have company and community, going on Zoom because they were sick of screens, easy stuff. Care is a two-way street. No, care isn't a reciprocal two-way anything; it's giving and receiving when it's needed. I am comfortable with my typical capacity to give more than I receive, but it breaks my heart that, when we needed care, it wasn't given by so many individuals and multiple communities to whom we have given so much.*

In moments when I could not tolerate free-associating the past, I allowed space for not writing, for closing my computer, for putting the pen down. I allowed myself to sit with what the experience had been. In these moments of deep despair, my mind would wander to dreaming of past experiences of joys and hospitality, times before COVID of welcoming people into my home most days. This would also slip into dreaming of futures where community for me is possible and desired by others, even if it requires a temporary routine change or a couple negative tests. The move to the *progressive* opened space for gratitude and joy in the sadness of my *regressive* writings about this part of my experience as a community member and educator. The observing of my experiences is painful. It also contains hopeful recollections that defy the overwhelming despair and loneliness.

## *Progressive* Futuring

As I move to the *progressive*, I imagine spaces that are hospitable to dis/Abled bodies and minds. Here, I consider the ways non-normativity enhances neighborliness (Kittay 2011; McRuer, 2006; Schumm, 2010). This imagination is enhanced through the life and works of Fred Rogers.

*… I have always wanted to have a neighbor just like you*
*I've always wanted to live in a neighborhood with you*
*… So, let's make the most of this beautiful day*
*Since we're together, we might as well say*
*Would you be mine? Could you be mine?*
*Won't you be my neighbor?*
*… Won't you please, won't you please?*
*Please, won't you be my neighbor?*

As I took up the suggestion to "ponder meditatively the future" (Pinar & Grumet, 2014, p. xv) and to engage in thinking that is aspirational so that I can "ascertain where I am moving" (p. xvi), I found myself engaged in a prayerful act, and when I observed what I had written, I had lingering questions: How am I dreaming? What's here? What do I want to teach? Who do I imagine myself to be? What are my desires?

> *It's a future of radical acceptance. A future where bodies and minds that don't "fit" aren't made inconvenient but are honored. This requires a continual working toward viewing and fracturing what has been made normal in efforts of hospitality. I see my syllabi in front of me full of texts that help us see anew. I want to teach, while I learn with students, new possibilities for welcoming anyone who has been pushed to a margin. In my classroom full of graduate students from beautifully varied perspectives, experiences, and disciplines, we can teach each other how to engage in projects and writing with others and communities that welcome bodies and minds that have been pushed aside.*

The despair of the past and present is evident in my *progressive* writings as I write of wishing and longing for scenes in the future that are reminiscent of the past. I write of seeing others and their needs in community fully and of being seen and given the care I need to be with others, to be welcomed as their neighbor. This *futuring* necessitates radical hospitality and collective desire for inclusivity, not tolerance. This dreamed of future holds hope through generosity through considerate and conscientious care for others' experiences and needs.

Part of my entry to being able to understand and even begin to write through a *currere* process is connected to my view of myself as a teacher and the way this teacher-self is connected to who I am as a learner, community member, and someone who encounter others. Whether I consider work with youth in my past and present, who I am as a mother, or who I am as a professor—the teacher-self carries through with desires to be welcoming and open-hearted. This *progressive* thinking has also left me with this question of *how* I am I dreaming. *How* do I engage in f*uturing*? The heart of this reflection is how the *progressive* moment is connected to my desire to both "see and be seen" from my writings:

> *I wish for a return to the full, loud, boisterous house of the past. I know that I have changed, but I want to be a place where people gather to eat and laugh and talk about what is on our hearts. I wish for more people gathered around my table than we have room for and for more food than we can eat. I also savor these times of the four of us and what it means that we are community. Our family is so close. I hope for a future where that continues to grow. But I long for and dream of a future with ease and flexibility to have people pop in relatively unannounced for a quick hang out.*

> *I'm hopeful we'll find tools. Maybe molecular tests or other tools that can help this. I want people to want to find these solutions (not just tolerate them). I dream of a future that there's more generosity just to consider our experiences and do more to want to be with us.*

In a recent exchange with the same friend mentioned above, as we contemplated what it means to engage in *currere* work, I emphasized the importance of the *progressive* moment stating, "understanding the imagined future, even idealizing some things is part of understanding who we are in the world based on who we want to be." I went on to state,

> I think sometimes it can feel almost trite to imagine. Image what? Just pontificate about the ideal? Or not? And, of course it's "not," but I've found in my own process I end up meandering through what I want to see the world *as*, and it helps me get to who I want to be or imagining in that way. And, then, it sheds some serious light on the *regressive*. It's almost like a prayer this stuff.

This "stuff," this *currere* work, is prayerful. In my meditative moves to imagining, I allow myself to hope, to hope without restraint. In those moments, I am able to see my past in a way that helps me to understand the actions I must take for a better future.

This is not easy. The imagined future can seem like an impossibility. Parker and Dawe (2024) write that to "situate [oneself] in time" through future imaginings when the future is not made for you is "uncertain" and yet the move to the *progressive* is "an act of survival and resistance" (p. 39). It can also be a scary proposition as Forde (2023) describes how wading into dreams of being, personally and professionally, "is frightfully uncertain" (p. 4). While my reflections on neighborliness as experienced through my teaching, dis/Ability, and interactions are different from these authors, imagining myself in the world and in interactions unmediated by ableism can be disorienting, and the uncertainty of if or when can be frightening.

In his ruminations on curriculum in the information and social media age, Pinar (2019) points out, "Because it is imagined now, the future represents an expression of the present" (p. 79). For me, these meditations help me navigate despair and hope. As I dream of myself and the world as possible futures, I see the past with greater clarity. This clarifying *futuring* brings the hopeful remnants of the past into focus informing the imagined future. As I bring these together, I am able to engage the present with hope. I have learned through my engagement in *currere* as a many years-long process that it is the imagining, the reimagining, the wading into the uncertainty that allows the reorientation and analysis.

## Orienting *Analytical* Moment

My move to the *analytical* moment brings what I know through observing my experiences together with my hopes for the future. This *analytical* move aides my thinking through what is happening in my present to show me something new about how I might understand and engage with dis/Ability justice, with my histories, and with my "neighbors" given the complexity of interacting in an ableist world.

Vaughan (2023) frames the *analytical* as moving from reimagining to reorienting. She also shares that this reorientation is dynamic in ways that coming to understandings can lead to further disorientation as in her experience when she realized "that we already had many tools needed to make a more accessible world. What was missing was the desire to create the space we needed" (p. 67). Extending from uncertainty and fear one can feel in the progressive as we see in Parker and Dawe (2024) and Forde (2023), Vaughan demonstrates what I am naming as despair and hope as present in her analysis. I see this acknowledgement as moving me back to the present with a greater sense of what I must do. Connected to this slippage between writing through the *progressive* and how that enables my *analysis*, I see the ways this deepens my understandings. With this deepened understanding, as Pinar and Grumet (2014) write, "can come deepened agency" (p. xiv). The *analytical* moment is made possible by hope as an active agential posture.

In my *analytical* writings, I wrote about my experiences since the global crisis of COVID as *clarifying* when it comes to how I understand hospitality and care. In a chapter on dis/Ability, Fred Rogers (1983) writes about having a dis/Abled guest regularly on the *Neighborhood* as helpful "in many ways" for everyone involved in making the show (p. 78). He writes,

> One of life's joys is discovering that we can be open to new experiences that at first seem strange or even scary. It's always exhilarating to find, as happens so often, that the barriers

> that seem to separate us from other people are like mirages and vanish as we get closer to people. (p. 78)

He goes on to explain that acknowledging, asking questions, and talking about one's dis/Ability, and proximity to them "seems to clear the miragelike obstacles" and open modes of expression and acceptance not just of the dis/Abled person, but of everyone involved in the relation (p. 78).

As I sit with my experiences of the last many years and the anger—nigh, heartbreak—that I have felt being isolated as people chose to *not* be my neighbor, I return to thought of masks and masking. Perhaps, seeing through my public masks through *currere* and sharing parts of what I am learning here can "penetrate" (Pinar & Grumet, 2014, p. xiv) in ways that clear the mirage and open possibilities for neighborliness. At times, this might require a neighbor to put on a high filtration mask or look at me with my physical mask on to see me, to really be my neighbor rather than excluding and forgetting. It could be that it is in the asking questions, discussing my dis/Ability, and seeing me (often without seeing the lower half of my face) that another can find their way to disrupting the normalizing ableist practices of excluding different bodies and minds and find their way to my front porch, or walk the wooded path in my neighborhood, or to embrace a protocol that can welcome me and others who have been left aside.

## *Progressive* Emphasis

Pinar (2019) writes that, "by discerning the future in the past and present, we can expand the temporal range of what we experience now, discerning (dis)continuities within the three" (p. 79). In this way, the *progressive* is not simply a means to engage in the *analytical*. It is also through this *futuring* of who I want to be that actually reveals the profundity of the *regressive*. It is only through imagining different worlds, daring to think of who I want to be, that I can understand who I am now and who I was in the past. In other words, the *progressive* imagining of what I desire for myself and for who I will be in the future reveals who I am in the past and also enables my knowing of how to reenter the present. The *progressive* slip helps us to get a fuller picture of who we are by knowing what we want to be. In an excerpt as I pondered the future I wrote,

> *I see myself as someone who can act with grace towards someone who has done something wrong, hurtful, or otherwise damaged their relationship with me. I dream of a forgiving future. As I teach, mother, form friendships, and reconnect, I see my future self as acting with generosity while not shying away from the pain of the past. I see a future where I can handle the nuance of what I have experienced, how these experiences have changed me,* and *engage others, especially those who have caused heartache, with openness, understanding, and love.*

As Pinar (2023) describes, "an expanded subjectivity," even momentarily, is made possible through the suspension of one's present experiences through our *analysis* of our experiences and *progressive* imaginings (p. 2). The *progressive* cannot be missed or skipped over. Fully engaging reflection on who one might be in the future and what one might experience lends us insights about those past experiences and how we might engage in *analysis*.

Pinar (2004) writes, "The point of *currere* is an intensified engagement with daily life, not an ironic detachment from it" (p. 37). My engagement with the *progressive* drives me back to this

sharpened awareness of my own interiority and my experiences with others and the world around me. In this way, *currrere* becomes a means of embracing the fullness of living and a way for me to understand the complexities of keenly felt despair and hope.

## *Synthetical* Sense-Making: Despair, Hope, and Fred Rogers

I have learned to understand myself, the world around me, and how I must return to the places I live my life with others with greater awareness of the complexity of emotion and being through my *currere* engagement. As I experience a *synthetical* moment even now through this writing, it is important to see that this engagement happens in careful reflexive practice on my own and in community (Vanderbilt et al., 2024). My process is also deeply informed by avenues of reading and study as I work my way through these expanding temporalities.

This query is fraught and can be quite tricky as I navigate a still ableist world embracing those around me while pointing out and working toward change. As Rogers (1994) says, "Often, problems are knots with many strands, and looking at those strands can make the problem seem different" (p. 99). Working through *currere* as an ongoing entangled process offers me a way to see the threads of knots I have experienced, and the *progressive* brings those strands into greater relief. This makes paths forward more visible. I am able to notice what I can do to disentangle the knots that have caused the pain and isolation and see ways around the twists and turns. Rogers (1994) notes that loss, whether temporary or more permanent, comes with grief that can also contain anger and a great deal of sadness (p. 98). He also explains that it is in loss that we feel a deep sense of hurt, especially when this has to do with loss of people we love and relationships (p. 101). Through *currere*, I am able to observe and feel the grief, anger, and sadness of the isolation and rejection I have experienced in a way that helps me understand the hurt and loss. This understanding along with dreaming of who I imagine myself to be in a less ableist world gives me new visions for future possibilities.

What I have learned through this *progressive* writing and linkages to the *regressive* includes the ways non-normativity enhances neighborliness (Kittay 2011; McRuer, 2006; Schumm, 2010). I have seen the ways and felt the ways returning to "normal" and what has often been called a "new normal" have been exclusionary. A radical acceptance of non-normativity is a *progressive* imagining. For me, there has never been a "return to normal" or a finding of "a new normal" as has often been said since the spring of 2020. And, as I theorize it, that's good. I have had new ways to recognize how I and others reify normativity. I now have ways of seeing the world and, with that, perhaps, solutions to seemingly intractable problems we face. So, theorizing this lack of "return," this moving farther and farther away from "normal," is good. Living is a painful journey.

As I think through the *analytical* moment as enabled by my *progressive* dreaming of extending hospitality in new ways, and as I grieve not knowing welcoming community in the same ways or in any sense of a return to before 2020, I am reminded of Roger's (1994) words,

> Something we all need in order to feel the fullness of life: It's not only a sense that we belong on our planet, but also that we belong in other people's lives—that we are loved, loveable, and capable of loving. (p. 21)

As I come to this moment with a greater awareness of the ways I can foster relationships in community and the ways I believe we need to see community in the future with greater hospitality

toward varied access needs, I see who I mut be in such a world. This helps me understand my experiences with isolation and despair and reenter the world hopeful with a sense of the present and my role in it. Rogers (1994) reminds us that "relationships are like dances in which people try to find whatever happens to be a mutual rhythm in their lives" (p. 21). I believe this flow in community is possible and that my *progressive* imaginings as informed by my recollections, however painful, bring me to the world with greater hope in my despair.

*... Neighbors are people who are close to us*
*And friends are people who are close to our hearts*
*I like to think of you as my neighbor and my friend*

This means I will continue to think through the emotional, intellectual, and physical understandings of what it means for me to be in the world knowing that so many find it hard or impossible to engage dis/Abled people as neighbors. And, even with that, I turn to the prompt, "Let's make the most of this beautiful day." I turn to this while some decide they won't be my neighbor. As I have written with others before, I am able to come to the *synthetical* because of the relational work of what it means to collaborate with others like Kelly Vaughan and Jamie Buffington-Adams (Vanderbilt et al., 2024). The experiences with community, in the context of deeply caring relationships, with people who choose to be my neighbor, allow this greater awareness that propels action. Rogers (1994) reminds us that "taking care is one way to show your love. Another way is letting people take good care of you when you need it" (p. 25). Through the dance of friendship, community, and giving each other what we need when we need it, I am able to find my way to meaning.

As I conclude, I would like to offer something I have learned as I have engaged I this ongoing, difficult, encouraging work over the past several years specifically related to my experiences with isolation because of the COVID-19 pandemic. As alluded to, my self-awareness through *currere* enhances how I am able to bring myself to community and to relationships in the present in my city, my neighborhood, in my classroom, and in other spaces. Rogers (1994) reminds us that "you bring all of who you ever were and are to any relationship you have today" (p. 24). As I acknowledge and gain new insights into the ways that "anger makes us feel so isolated" (Rogers, 1994, p. 26), I am able to reconsider what that anger is showing me. Rogers (1994) teaches that

> forgiveness is as important to our emotional well-being as being able to wait for what we want or to cope with stress. Like most of the important inner strengths of life, the ability to forgive (to let go of resentments, to give up being an accuser) takes root early in our becoming. (p. 109)

While Rogers encourages adults who interact with children to consider, teach, demonstrate, and encourage forgiveness in this quote, I find it a part of the budding awareness of how I must reenter the present. Through imagining who I want to be in the future, I am able to realize what forgiveness looks like in community in greater ways. At times it is a moment that needs to be worked and realized again, to let go of resentments, to let go of needing repentance, to learn the dance of being in and building community that moves us towards welcoming dis/Abled people like me.

I also offer a heart-felt acknowledgement that, while I have been expressing these ideas in discussions with friends, in conference presentations, and in meetings with students interested in

*currere*, writing this article was itself *currere*. Rogers (2005) states, "Who we are in the present includes who we were in the past" (p. 50), and Pinar (2023) extends this to the ways moving through *currere* and how *currere* "provides a portal to a different future" (p. 2). For me, this is enabled because of the engagement with the *progressive*—the taking seriously the meditative.

Rogers (1994) states, "Listening is where love begins: listening to ourselves and then to our neighbors" (p. 115). I end with this quote as I continue to ponder listening to self with *currere* and thank you for listening and for journeying here, perhaps, in a way, as my neighbor.

## Acknowledgements

My understandings of the progressive would not be possible without the decade-long conversation and deep friendship of Kelly Vaughan and Jamie Buffington-Adams. My gratitude for their steadfastness and willingness to embrace me no matter the circumstance is immeasurable. I am also deeply grateful to my dear friend, Brian Casemore, for his time, curiosity, and always choosing to be there for me. Most of all, I would like to acknowledge my husband, Ryan, and my children, Elliott and Silas, who continue to teach me what it means to be good neighbors and look to the future with hope on this lovely day in our beautywood.

## Notes

1. The lyrics of "Won't you be my neighbor?" are published in several locations and opened each episode of the PBS series *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood.* The lyrics are used as interludes throughout this article and can be found along with an instrumental arrangement in Rogers's (1983) book.
2. I punctuate dis/Ability throughout. In the tradition of scholars like Gallagher et al. (2023) who extended dis/ability punctuation with the capital A to highlight the socially constructed nature of disability and ability and to also "resist deficit thinking and language" with the use of the capitalization along with the punctuation.
3. Fred Rogers was a beloved television personality beginning with a regional television show, *The Children's Corner*, which aired on Pittsburgh area public television from 1955-1961. He is most well-known for his national program, *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*, which aired from 1968-2001 with daily half-hour episodes where Fred Rogers discussed what he called "important things" with children and other characters in his neighborhood. Each episode also included interludes in the "Neighborhood of Make Believe" where humans and puppets interacted and emphasized important lessons and ideas for viewers.

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# MOVIEHOUSE POEMS (3)

By Mark O'Hara
*Stephen T. Badin High School*

### IN THE PROJECTION ROOM

the platter spins
and light floats
above us; submerged
in our seats, quiet
washing around us
as we slouch
and the undertow
of soundtrack starts.
We're suddenly sprung
from daylight, the boredom
of brightness, the film
an unguent
as it enters our bodies
and settles, stored
like a calm
we never thought
would stay with us.

### THEY MET IN BOMBAY

The plot: Clark Gable's a jewel thief;
Rosalind Russell's a liar in his league.
While they fall in love there's comic relief
and then a stolen diamond provides intrigue.
The setting's international—a brief
trip on a steamer with the unique
Peter Lorre (eyes taped, as Captain Chang)—
and then in Hong Kong: the next sturm and drang.
I'm not the audience of 1941
but when Gable stumbles into war
(impersonating an officer) he's won
the Victoria Cross. There's bloody scores
of soldiers dead, yet Gable's lauded.
(Deceit has always been applauded.)

## *One Minute to Zero*

Sunlight breaks through layers
Of clouds. Robert Mitchum, American
colonel, loves war widow Ann Blyth.
Turkey vultures soar over the hillside.
Mitchum's deployed to South Korea
to evacuate refugees. Tops of trees
sway slightly. Separately, Blyth
travels to Korea to aid civilians.
They reunite after Blyth witnesses
the shelling of evacuees ordered
by Mitchum. Petals from a dogwood
float on the pond. The rub?
Blyth's unaware guerilla fighters
Held guns in evacuees' backs.
The pond water, flat as a patio, reflects
vultures weaving through the petals.

## *Marathon Man*: Rhyme Royal

The sight of Roy Scheider, stuck in the hard-
pack of his belly, face a pre-ghost white,
shocks every watcher. We disregard
what's on our minds as we start the white-
hot hate for Olivier—and despite
the pain we feel for Dustin Hoffman's pain—
this Nazi's death is nicely inhumane.

## A Course in Being a Spectator

Watching is not a function of sight
as much as a feeling of mind—
an endeavor to take the touch of light

and twist it into meaning. A sight
might be decades past in time
but flash back freshly as morning light.

From a revival of *House of Wax* one night
at the Sam Eric, what survives
is not the gimmicks of 3D but the fright

of Vincent Price's face crumbling, the sight
scary as the Phantom. A shock of this kind
is a body blow, knocking the wind out of the light.

Our eyes are tied to our guts, the sights
Cemented into beliefs we find
by watching not the objects of sight
but the subjects darkened by light.

## Cary Grant's Co-stars

Though there was a spark
when they first met
through most of the movies
Cary's character's hard to get.

While Ingrid's eyeing Nazi spies
she falls headlong for Cary.
He doesn't show his love for her
until things get hairy.

Eve/Eva's not who she says,
and Cary's identity's a frame.
After the save on replica Rushmore
they are no strangers on the train.

Cary lies to Audrey who thinks,
off and on, he's a scamp.
By the end she's decoded his heart
and placed her stamp.

## Cinema as Redemption

The crowd ducks under the marquee
to avoid the downpour of July heat:
the cooled air makes them purr.
Newsreel says war is raging—
or is it the people? Not even

Spy Smasher's victories can satisfy
The crowd's craving for innocence.
Veins on their foreheads engorge
With tension. Heavy cigarette
smoke mingles with the light stream
high in the house, so
motion on the 40-foot screen
is slightly blurred. Early
in the feature a man brandishes
his wit, but then she enters—
object of dreams in the dead of day,
every hair and stare in place—
and the crowd coos
at Rita Hayworth!

## *Now, Voyager*: A Watcher's Pathway

The world's black and white
as she holds her hand open
so the long cigarette looks like a finger
on fire, smoke separating her face
from her lover's, a hazy ablution.
From a back row a collision of sound:
a man coughs or cackles and we
are shocked back into the auditorium
with its cathedral ceiling, until seconds later
the echelons of light above our heads carry us
back to the cadence of their talking,
the burnished bass of Claude Rains
overlapping Bette Davis' staccato rejoinders,
the tension stacking against our collective
body while the soundtrack shakes us down
like a pickpocket, and we depart the theater
wondering if any ending can be happy.