

A PRAXIS OF *CURRERE* AND CONTEMPLATIVE INQUIRY IN AN EXTERNALIZING SPACE OF DIALOGIC ENCOUNTER

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We, the authors of this article and a third curriculum scholar, came together in the fall of 2020, in a writing group about race, never having met before. What began as a formal sharing of personal writing soon evolved into a dynamically interactive and intimate series of dialogic encounters. This article mines our experiences of sorting through emerging understandings of our racial justice writing group as a space for exploring discursive, anti-racist gestures, both individual and communal.¹

In this article, we first discuss the origin of our group and the possibilities it offers for an anti-racist praxis. We then reflect on our personal and collective engagement with *currere* through a curriculum of racial justice evocations (Pinar, 2011; Taliaferro Baszile, 2015) and by way of a group structure that allows for a discursive encounter. In this encounter, each of us has been able to make gestures, entreaties, and demands from our respective subjective and theoretical positions, within a structure that ensures an intellectually rigorous, yet comfortably predictable routine.

In the subsequent sections, we each reflect on the personal theoretical and aesthetic projects that we brought to and refined within the group, projects we shared on a 2021 American Association for the Advancement of Curriculum Studies (AAACS) panel. Finally, we share thoughts on the curricular potential of our writing group, in which internal and contemplative work and dialogic encounters with *currere* can be externalized meaningfully amidst an unhurried and supportive social atmosphere.

¹ We want to acknowledge our third member, Dr. Shauna Knox's, participation as an editor of this paper when we brought our drafts to our group. Fittingly, this article bears her mark, as does our elaboration on the curricular possibilities of a racial justice writing collective. Also, it should be noted that Leslie was not enrolled in the RJEWC course at this time, although she is a doctoral student in the same department.

Our Origins and Departures

Our three-person writing group emerged out of a larger Racial Justice Education Writing Collective (RJEWC) affiliated with the Graduate School of Education and Human Development at The George Washington University (GWU). The collective also supported four other writing groups, made up of students in the self-same graduate course. The work of the larger RJEWC bridged university coursework and engagement with a larger GWU community. Our smaller writing group, however, functioned in a space outside, though adjacent, to the academy.²

Like the formal curriculum of the larger RJEWC, we sought and continue to seek to enact an anti-racist praxis in the spirit of Rankine et al.'s (2016) Racial Imaginary project (B. Casemore, personal communication, May 13, 2021). Rankine is a poet, writer, and artist who authored *Citizen: An American Lyric* in 2014, a bestselling book-length poem about racism, which we read and discussed in group meetings.³ As with the Racial Imaginary project,, each member of our group endeavors to assert their individual voice, reflecting Rankine et al.'s (2016) “[belief] in the beauty and importance of an individual writer’s speaking in and to her history with as much depth and seriousness as she can muster, especially when that history doesn’t present itself as an otherwise-sayable event” (p. 14). This practice of individuation is evident in the work we describe in later sections of this article.

What’s also notable, however, is that through our collaboration, we have come to recognize the personal and curricular possibilities of making internal and contemplative work external, through and in the space of a supportive group. The group effectively makes the individual subjective process both generative of the group process and open to examination and critique. In this way, our group is more than a practical writing group. Instead, we engage with *currere*, what Pinar (2011) describes as “the running of the course—wherein the curriculum is experienced, enacted, and reconstructed” (p. 1), the curriculum in our case being one of racial justice evocations, as mediated through our group.

To foster our shared study and writing, we either employ Pinar’s (2011) notion of autobiography as a theory and practice of *currere*, or we enjoy the generative results of our encounter with *currere*. Each of us brings writing to the group drawn from our lived histories and experiences, while training our eyes toward anti-racist

² When speaking of our three-person writing group, we use the term *group*, rather than *collective*, which refers to the graduate course.

³ Rankine founded the Racial Imaginary project in 2011, initially as a website where she published responses to her open letter asking for writing about race, responses that would give space to witting or unwitting thoughts on the nature of race in one’s creativity and imagination. In 2015, Rankine, the writer Beth Loffreda, and the artist Max King Cap published an anthology of these entries called *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind*.

critiques, in ways that engender personal transformation. The heuristic that curriculum theorist James Macdonald developed in the early 1970s, which distinguished, as Janet Miller (2010) recalls, “conceptions, forms, and foci of curriculum theorizing” hastened a reconceptualization that Pinar (1995) subsequently enlarged and which allowed for greater debate and healthy argument about conceptions of curriculum. Our work is very much in keeping with and indebted to this history of critical thought, dissension, and expansion—actualizing what Miller describes so many decades later as “tensions and splits in current manifestations of varying and proliferating curriculum conferences across the spectrum of curriculum studies, writ large” (p. 16). It is the opportunity for emergent conflict, consensus, and an ongoing discourse that enlivens and rewards the individual experience of participating in our group.

The writing itself is, of course, a solitary affair but is also decidedly not “solipsistic and asocial” (Pinar et al., 1995, p. 523). Surely, autobiographical work is individualistic, but the sociality of our lived experience, past and present, also greatly influences our identity. We collaborate, akin to the way Miller (1990a) has described the social nature of the autobiographical, “in which lived experience can be discovered, expressed, and interpreted” (p. 524, as cited in Pinar et al., 1995). A necessary accompaniment to our private work is the influence we receive from the larger community and from the space of our group.

For example, in our interactive, dialogic encounters, we encourage one another’s creative risk-taking and the freedom to write with feeling. We readily demand more from each other’s work, in fact, in terms of deep, personal, and corporeal renderings. Naturally, at times, ideas that emerge in the group are insuperable and exceed the bounds of the group, by one or all of us. For example, we have had an ongoing dialogue, sparked by our reading of Rankine’s (2014) *Citizen: An American Lyric* and later by Selamawit Terrefe’s (2016) interview with Christina Sharpe, around the discourse of representation of Black trauma. This discourse is contemporary and contested and our ongoing discussion about its problematics—for example, who is the audience for accounts of Black trauma? What constitutes an authentic rendering? What is the value in a public recapitulation—what Sharpe (2012) calls a staging of traumatizing events and behaviors? This dialogue has not led to resolution or consensus in terms of anti-racist praxis, but the dialogic encounter is generative.

To preserve the intellectual perspicuity of our group, and to foster understanding among us, we strive to give respectful space to our distinct subjectivities and voices about these and other topics, contained within an unhurried and encouraging social atmosphere (Pinar et al., 1995). Our meeting each week “offers the possibility of passages back and forth between private and public” in which the “fissures” within which we collaborate in our sessions are “artificial distinctions that separate us from ourselves and from the relationships in which knowledge about the self and our

worlds are generated” (Miller, 1990a, as cited in Pinar et al., 1995, p. 524). When together, to allow for each of our alterities and histories unsayable, we often reflect Rankine et al. (2016) by “speaking in and to [our] history with as much depth and seriousness as [we] can muster” (p. 14).

In the spirit of the Racial Imaginary project, we also evaded the need to seek consensus or to perform in predictable ways. Primarily we try to elicit better writing from each other, asking for clarity, consistency, and logical coherence, while, as Rankine et al. (2016) stress, recognizing good writing as that which gives the reader “something to know. ... something [that] is brought into being that might otherwise not be known, something [that] is doubly witnessed” (p. 22). Our collective work is to enable each other to feel righteously seen and heard. The project also inspires and enlivens our work with its openness to multifarious compositions on race and the creative imagination.

Our Dear Reader Letters

As we gently evoke deeper and more expansive thought from one another, a consistent submission and review structure helps to provide stability and a reassuring predictability. We’ve become disciplined about our structure and have established a rhythm for honest, courageous, and respectful writing support. Based on the practices of the larger collective, for the first round of submissions, each of us wrote an informal one-to-two page “dear reader” letter. In the letter, we discussed the origin and purpose of the writing we planned to bring to the group, described the state of the writing, and what kind of feedback we wanted.

Each of us stated our goals for how we imagined our work might amplify in spaces of education and in broader society. We also celebrated the opportunities that have arisen—Shauna’s contract to produce a book on currere and decolonization in which she negotiates Black womanhood through autobiographical analysis; Jason’s art review publication on the work of artist Yanique Norman, an exploration of themes of Black fungibility, and the construction of racialized gender identity and futurity in Norman’s March 2020 exhibit at the Albany Museum of Art; and our recent panel presentation at the AAACS conference, mentioned earlier. In what follows, we, Jason and Leslie, discuss our theoretical and aesthetic projects individually, and then ponder the possibilities for anti-racist curriculum theory and praxis.

A Dialogic Encounter with Currere

In this section, I (Jason) consider the impact of the dialogic encounter in our writing group on my work as an artist, writer, and educator, especially the role autobiography has played as both a reference point for our writing together and as a newly foregrounded strategy in my practice. Each of us has offered our writing

group unvarnished moments of personal encounter with anti-racist theory and praxis, and with racism in the curriculum and our lived experiences.

This small writing group has meant much to my art and teaching practices. Our thinking together—from my perspective at the end of a school year teaching high school and undergraduate and graduate students remotely—emerges from the regularity and intimacy of weekly discussion, the reading and writing with my fellow members, and from our explorations of the role and possibilities of curriculum theory. Our dialogue—opened outward towards public discourse—quickens the work.

We have engaged a few themes centrally in our study together; importantly, the decolonial and anti-racist possibilities of currere and the psychosocial possibilities offered by varied reflections on and criticisms of Rankine's (2016) ideas of a Racial Imaginary. We have also thought together across a number of other theorists of race and racism, decolonialism and subalternity, and curriculum, and have generally worked to hold space for one another through the significant challenges of articulating fraught and imminently complicated notions of anti-racism. We frequently are unable to reach consensus; are always teaching one another terms, praxis, and theory; and offer the consistent labors—emotional, social, intellectual—of attending to the work and to the being of others, in the context of tremendous global racial strife.

I have been attending to my dialogic experiences in the group: negotiations of intersubjectivity and attempts at a sort of *bildung*—a notion of inner development and self-actualization, which Pinar (2011) develops in dialectic opposition to, especially, economic goals of contemporary institutional curriculum and pedagogy. I would also describe this internal project as that of enlightenment, at least in part, as described by Dogen Zenji as a practice of 'Studying oneself as forgetting oneself. Forgetting oneself is being enlightened by all things.' The dialogic encounter with Leslie and Shauna opens this opportunity to be enlightened by all things through reflection and attention to my own thoughts, behaviors and evolving understanding in the context of our writing together (Dogen, 1986/1253, p. 32).

Engaged in this manner of self-study, I am developing a battery of strategies for teaching, artmaking and writing effectively, in order to animate possibilities for engaging curriculum and pedagogy informed by the more salient and powerful contemporary critiques of White supremacy. Theorists informing my endeavors are Pinar (2011) and some Afropessimists, notably, Frank Wilderson, David Marriott, and Saidiya Hartman, who have called for study of Fanon (2008), whose work I am also engaging alongside and putting into discursive relation with Mahayana Buddhist curriculum and pedagogy (Dogen 1986/1253; Kokushi, 1996). It is my contention that the latter pushes notions of radical criticality in the context of hegemonic White supremacy to the brink.

I have also drawn on Brian Van Norden's and Jay Garfield's (2016) entreaties to recognize ethnocentrism as borne of broad resistance to non-Western philosophy curriculum (let alone pedagogy) in higher education. Their essay, published in *The New York Times*, "If Philosophy Won't Diversify, Let's Call it What it Really Is," a call to rename departments of philosophy "departments of European and American philosophy," engendered Van Norden's (2017) "...astonishment, [that the article] ignited a firestorm of controversy across the philosophy blogosphere" (p. 1). The cultural revetment against integrating the canon of philosophy undergirds the academy. This particular system of meaning operates against the curriculum's capacity for holding non-Western epistemic and ontological frameworks (Mitchell and Rosati, 2006). I have spent a great deal of time developing strategies and making gestures, in my teaching, writing, and artmaking, towards diversifying the inward facing canon and to slowly, gingerly—owing to a predictable experience of epistemic violence—to externalizing as public facing, a more broadly discursive and collaborative canon-making.

Strategies that have emerged in my teaching practice rely largely on broad discursive encounters, specifically with anti-racist theory and praxis. My curriculum writing, for instance, has come to offer opportunities for shared autobiographical experiences. The combination of our contemporary moment and conversations in our writing group, especially those around what Christina Sharpe (2012) calls the "staging of suffering Black life" (p. 839) have made, for me, an imperative of offering space for recapitulation and a shared witnessing and processing among my students. Further, this strategy of broad discursive encounters takes up texts faithful to contemporary anti-racist discourse. I spent time in each class that I taught during quarantine, across schools and disciplines, to screen and discuss Arthur Jafa's evocative and complex meditation on Black culture viz. anti-Blackness, *Love is the Message, the Message is Death* (Jafa, 2016). I worked to contextualize his practice with excerpted readings and discussions of the work of artists and theorists similarly engaged in producing formal and conceptual interventions meant, at least in part, to expand the discourse of anti-racist theory and praxis. The strategy has also relied on the generative possibilities emerging from offering students access to community, whether friends and colleagues who teach and made themselves available by video conference or the continuation of these interventions during out-of-school time (for example, in clubs that I sponsor at the high school and informal conversations with university students). In all cases, students organize conversation around the relationship of the texts/curriculum and their own lived experiences.

Student accounts of their familiarity with the events, behaviors, and theory foregrounded in the texts varied, and I enjoyed no resolute sense of progress in any of the contexts where I deployed these discursive strategies. I was comforted solely by the sense that we were working to make meaning of a violent and confusing

contemporary context and an often brilliant, salient, and challenging contemporary discourse in community. I also spent a great deal of time and energy working to build a community partnership in collaboration with students, parents, administration and faculty at our top-ranked, public, magnet high school, as well as with faculty and RJEWC participants from George Washington University's Graduate School of Education and Human Development, and with a for-profit anti-racism education firm based in DC. I worked to develop this partnership in the vein of the activism and fervor subsequent to the public, state-sanctioned assassination of George Floyd and toward developing a battery of anti-racist communal, curricular, and pedagogical interventions. The RJEWC served as a model for collegial discourse and productivity in terms of designing and writing curriculum, a funnel for vetting and sharing contemporary anti-racist theory, and a means of providing volunteers who would help to coordinate the broader project of community transformation.

A number of fissures emerged during the year that our school community began work in earnest. This anti-racist community-wide dialogue and the directive to assess and repair community norms, routines, curriculum and pedagogy were adopted by the Local School Advisory Team and written into the district-facing annual plan. After less than a year, the broad discursive strategy was abandoned by all constituent groups (parents, faculty, students) and by me. The social and emotional costs of shepherding the larger project proved too time-consuming, and too frequently reproductive of dynamics in the larger body politic, during a year that saw a series of violent encounters reflective of anti-Black behaviors across the country, including within walking distance of my school and home. I was unable to maintain the schedule of attending to the apprehensions of colleagues and community members unwilling to practically support the institutional project. A more focused diversity, equity and inclusion committee has taken up a narrower scope of work in the building, but I am confident that the labor of broader discourse awaits us, as our community works through the historical moment and, as elsewhere, finds itself reconciling the disparate voices of its constituencies. In the meantime, I have continued to rely on Leslie and Shauna and the space we have produced and the opportunities it provides for me to attend to my evolving, if pained and not always clear, notions of anti-racist praxis and discourse, whether in educational, community, or artmaking contexts.

In our writing group, this strategic labor has found some purchase in the commitment to engage one another's work, irrespective of legibility. I first submitted a draft of an article reviewing the artwork of Yanique Norman. The article worked as a sort of public proof of the epistemological and ontological possibilities of critical race theory, Marxist geography, and Buddhism for lensing cultural production. I workshopped the article with my writing partners and quickly realized that frustrations I experienced in our discourse—specifically, in writing for deep understanding but from a position of significant alterity—reflected the kinds of

difficulties my readers—and similarly my students as well as audiences of my artwork—might face when confronting the shifts in the ways of knowing that my work proposes. These semantic challenges were, of course, made more affectively urgent, but perhaps less legible, by my intention towards antiracist liberation during a highly contentious and racist historical moment.

But what proved remarkable for me was the discovery that an autobiographical bracket could describe a sort of opening for a more constructive dialogic encounter. Shauna and Leslie pushed me to assert personal experience in my writing, which worked as a shoehorn for theory. While an earlier draft of the review of Norman's work earned an offer to publish the piece in a literary journal, my apprehensions had shifted, as I had confronted misunderstandings in the group. The later version, emerging from the group's rich and recursive process, was published, nearly without edits. Most significantly for me, as both a marginalized subject and interlocutor on behalf of marginalized discourse, I'd gained confidence in the autobiographical turn as stratagem.

In the group, my confrontation with Shauna's brilliant explorations of the decolonial possibilities of *currere* further opened my eyes to the role that autobiographical writing and speech might play in my development as an African-American academic. To wit, I realized the power of and further committed to frequent use of autobiography in my artwork to produce space for my voice as subaltern and for illustration of the kinds of difficult knowledge confronted by shibboleths of anti-racist discourse, Marxism, and Buddhism.

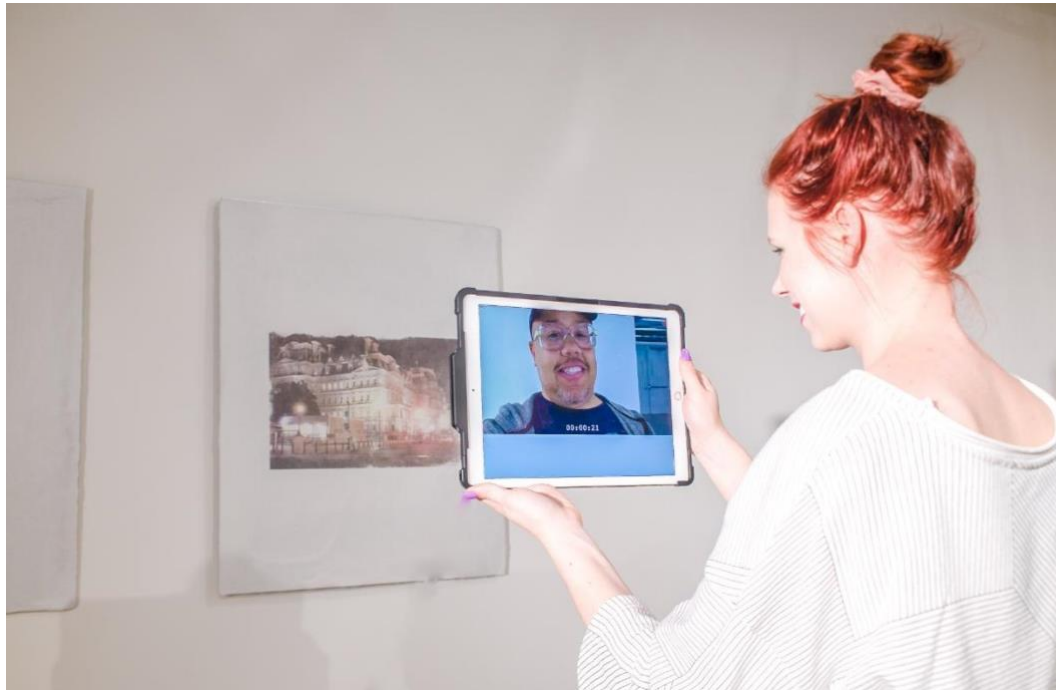
I brought to the group a script for a graphic-novel-in-the-expanded-field that features a near recapitulation of my early childhood and that privileges the role specific material histories play in the generation of personal and social experience. This work, *Laocoön*, offers narratives that run parallel to my autobiography, including an account of the circumstances surrounding the death of journalist Gary Webb, whose *San Jose Mercury News* article on the putative role of the CIA in a late-century flood of narcotics in black and urban neighborhoods across the country, and the uproar from the African-American national polity, was roundly panned by mainstream print press. *Laocoön* is an entirely visual narrative documenting the material geographies—from Central America and across the US—undergirding industrial crack production and distribution.

Fig. 1 *The Laocoön: A Graphic Novel*

Bulluck, Jason. (2018). [Prints on paper, iPad, software, 2:00 video, performance]
Artist's collection

The Laocoön, as shown in Figure 1 above, is a new media piece that also offers its audience an opportunity to engage with its subject matter, subject and author, via custom software that automates a 30-second, live encounter at the end of the visual narrative. In this visualization, I appear and perform, offering a Zen koan to engage in the context of the work, from an iPad used to access the work's text (see Figure 2 on next page). This performance is expressive of a Buddhist curricular intervention (Kokushi, 1996) and makes an offer for audiences to reconsider any trite, habituated ideas of identity (especially that of Black, urban youth at the height of the Crack Wars). The autobiographical offering here was never paramount to my artmaking, but it ultimately served my project of diversifying a canon of epistemological and ontic frameworks for attending to our shared histories.

Fig. 2 *The Laocoön, performance still. 2018.*



I'd considered the Buddhist curricular intervention here the work's thesis and major poetic force. The autobiography was subsumed, at least in my consideration, until discussion of the script with the group, whose clear focus of interest was with the story unfolding about my coming-of-age. In concert with the experience of workshopping the art review, the implication to foreground autobiographical narrative, as a bracket for difficult knowledge (Britzman, 1998) seemed clear.

A Praxis of Reverie, Art, and Hard History

For me (Leslie), art is integral to life, a way of representing inchoate and emotionally laden experiences, something like waking dreamwork. My doctoral studies in curriculum and instruction and my studies at the Washington Baltimore Center for Psychoanalysis inform my personal artwork. Conversely, my artwork leads to an engagement with scholarly study.

When I joined the writing group, I had been pondering the role of daydreaming, or *reverie*, when confronting and symbolizing painful histories and themes. With a mind to education and curriculum theory, I sought to understand reverie better and what emerges from it. I had been exploring theoretically how a praxis of reverie with art may help students to deepen their engagement with hard history, of slavery in particular, which is hard on many levels. As Hasan Kwame Jeffries (2018) notes, it's "hard to comprehend the inhumanity that defined [slavery]. It is hard to discuss the

violence that sustained it. It is hard to teach the ideology of white supremacy that justified it. And it is hard to learn about those who abided it" (Jeffries, 2018, p. 5).

Alongside this scholarly pursuit, I took up an autobiographical, self-expressive practice in which I explored ways to engage in states of reverie, to contemplate White privilege and race, and to make art as a way of meaning-making. When I shared some pieces of work I had been doing in an 11 x 17 mixed media art journal, members of my group urged me to describe clearly *what reverie is*. It took several rounds of submissions to describe the phenomenon. My understanding of reverie began with the British psychoanalyst Bion (1962), who developed a theory of maternal reverie. He theorized that the mother (or caregiver) helps the infant to tolerate frustration and helps to metabolize difficult emotions during a state of mutual attunement, or *reverie*. Bion's concept of reverie represents an important dynamic for developing psychic health and one's later capacity to symbolize, to think and learn.

I then enlarged the concept of reverie using scholarship in the fields of neuroscience, psychology, philosophy, and phenomenology. From Bachelard (1958, 1971) and Calfee (2006), I distinguish an imaginal approach as poetic and visual from a Bionian psychoanalytic approach. An interdisciplinary approach from Fox & Christoff (2018) in the areas of "neuroscience, psychology, philosophy, phenomenology, history, education, contemplative traditions, and clinical practice" (p. 3) informed my understanding of an emerging science of *spontaneous thought*. The way the authors organize this mental phenomenon according to the strength of deliberate and automatic constraints on one's ability to allow "spontaneous thought to flow freely as it unfolds" (p. 4) helped me to locate reverie as between two extremes of automatic dreaming and deliberate creative thinking. Using this wide-ranging scholarship, I created this provisional definition:

Reverie is a state of mind, a relaxed way of thinking in which thoughts meander. What reverie is *not* is an effort to seek an empty mind. That said, quieting a busy mind, through meditation for example, may make room for reverie. Reverie is also not zoning out, as in not being aware of where one's mind has wandered, nor is reverie rumination and worry, and is not effortful concentration. In a state of reverie, one might free associate, allowing thought to follow thought regardless of obvious connections, and one might imagine an idea or a future plan. Reverie may occur with gentle encouragement, such as going on a walk. One can be both aware of one's state of reverie and also susceptible to unconscious influences (ideas arising unbidden) (Smith Duss, 2021).

I recount my experience here with reverie as situated within a particular set of parameters. My experience is in accord with the preceding definition, except that

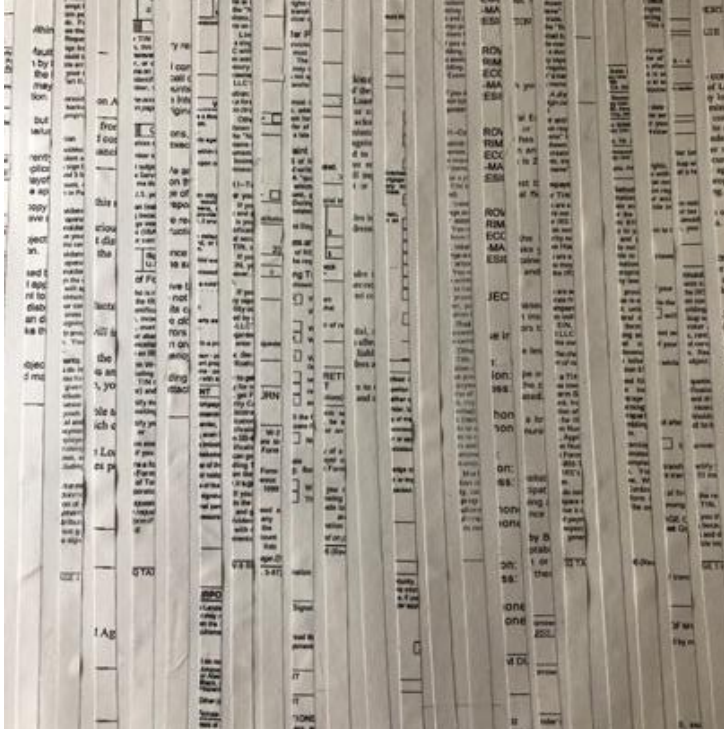
reverie for me begins deliberately through an encounter with the ideas of others. My waking dreamwork occurs in relationship with the voices of others and with a particular goal, to gain knowledge about Black experience and slavery in America.

While studying this hard history and its aftermath, I would pause occasionally and let my mind wander as I read *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* by Christina Sharpe (2016), various essays in Nikole Hannah Jones's 1619 Project (2019), and *The Book of Delights* by Ross Gay, (2019) and listened to the podcast Teaching Hard History (n.d.) on slavery with Dr. Hasan Kwame Jeffries (not all at the same time, mind you, and not all resulting in the art I'm sharing in this article). In this freely associative state, I would notice associations or memories, making a mental or handwritten note, or a short audio recording on my phone. It didn't matter to me, at this point, if my musings were fragmented or not linked together logically. I would work on deriving meaning from these impressions at a later time (Bion, 1962).

Sometimes I would let my mind wander while doing an otherwise mindless activity. One night, my art journal open on the table nearby, I took up a chore of shredding old files. I held the loan paperwork from a condo my husband and I mortgaged from the bank early in our marriage. I remembered how I had written an earnest, heartfelt letter to acquire the loan, considering my role as a gig worker, my husband a musician without a credit score, but our having a down payment from my father as a gift. I remember thinking it would only take persistence to prevail, which it did. As the long strips of paper emerged from the shredding machine, only then did I see white privilege written all over their palimpsest of black and white print. The no longer legible series of numbers and authoritative contractual language bearing my and my husband's "personally identifiable information" shook my foundation.

I began methodically gluing the strips side by side to pages of my journal. The work was slow and rhythmic, allowing a reverie state to accompany the process. I coaxed my mind to think about the meaning of benefiting from generational wealth and a sense of certainty that I would also build wealth through home ownership. As the strips filled three pages, as shown in figure 3 on the following page, my thoughts formed around the history of the early 2000s when predatory loans targeted mostly racially segregated, minority neighborhoods. I recalled having read one of the 1619 Project essays that traced these subprime lending patterns to the slave-based economy and the post-Civil War dual-banking system, which resulted in a now overly complicated arrangement of state and federal bank charters and regulations (Baradaran, 2019). In this process of historical study borne of reverie, I had been struck when reading about how the crisis ultimately caused Black communities to lose more than half of their wealth.

As I attended to the nuance in the history of systemic racism and of my complicity, I wondered how I might add more mixed media to the backgrounds of shredded loan paperwork as a way to metabolize my unsettled feelings. I had begun to reflect upon Fig. 3 *One of three art journal pages with shredded loan paperwork.*



this brutal history. I listened quietly and contemplatively for the still, small voice. Then, stepping back to gaze at the pages, I began to see uncanny juxtapositions of words, and fragments of words from the original paperwork: dress, waiting, I can, pose, LIE, barter, ICE. These words put me in mind of the “anagrammatical blackness” (Sharpe, 2016, p. 75) that Sharpe evoked as words are rearranged metaphorically to create new meaning, in which signification becomes tenuous. Sharpe speaks of “boy” meaning “thug” (p. 75), whereas here, I saw aggrandizing messages or nothing hidden at all: ICE meant deportation; “pose” meant, I qualified for credit because I checked Caucasian on my application. In this case, I noticed that the Whiteness underlying the words “lie” and “pose” was not so much tenuous as tenacious.

The mixed media work evolves as I continue to engage with history education that Farley (2009) suggests might be “a site of conflict, rather than its solution” (p. 538). I agree with Farley that teachers ought not to be invested in the responsibility of giving children decidedly rational, chronological explanations for such atrocities as genocide. As she notes, the historicity of contending with the trauma of historical understanding has the capacity itself for eliciting a history of trauma and a disruption of meaning, for historians and teachers alike. My work with history and art animates Farley’s contentions. I face inner turmoil as I sense that the traces—

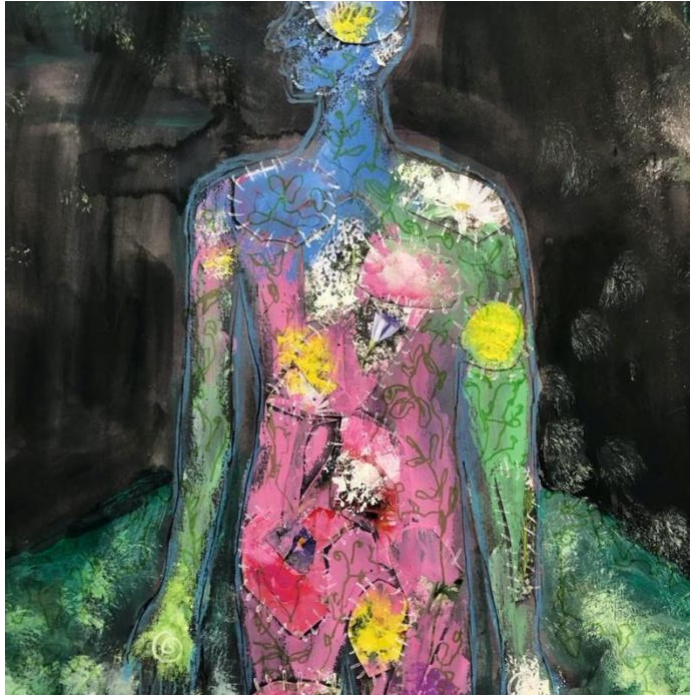
those uncanny words emerging in the work—originate from my internal history and am discomfited that there is no easy or quick resolution.

The hope, Farley (2009) asserts, resides in the psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott's ideas on *re-illusioning*, or a third transitional space, where one can experience the self through symbolic means. In a safe space, it's possible to begin to tolerate hard history, to hasten a necessary loss of innocence. For example, Farley explicates Winnicott's "playing with fire" analogy, in which children might get close enough to a burning candle to learn what *heat* is, the word and the concept. As Farley explains, "through language, one is able to tolerate the experience of losing one's footing in the world. Language, then, approaches Winnicott's third time of re-illusion, a transitional space, where one can symbolize aspects of the environment that fail, without having to be literally burned or having to abide by the 'No' that prohibits any risky engagement at all" (p. 544). I also draw on Winnicott's (1971) ideas of the incipient creative potential within the third transitional space of play, which by extension becomes an artistic means of self-symbolization. Indeed, my art begins to allow meaning to emerge, an expressive way to metabolize deep-seated experiences of White privilege. There's an attending to these difficult states that also builds up a tolerance for an unceasing currere.

Accordingly, another piece I shared in the writing group emerged from having read a short essay by Ross Gay (2019) called "Still Processing" on the commodification of Black suffering. Here, I contemplated a problematic conflation of Blackness and suffering, seeking not to over intellectualize, but to take in the ideas more deeply than I might from a reading or recitation. As I created my piece, I thought about Gay's assertions of Blackness as equated with suffering in so much popular culture and media: "*The Wire*" (p. 220) providing a case in point. I thought about the way this tendency hides the truth of systemic oppression. The poem, situated in Gay's collection of short essays on joy, gave me occasion to muse on Black joy borne of (or in the midst of) suffering, joy as resistance, and joy without a White gaze. I had these ideas in mind as I worked in mixed media, letting the piece emerge in my reverie. Once I reached a stopping place, I noticed the bright, exuberant lines and colors, but also with some consternation an unappealing miasma of green and black, a sense of weight. Figure 4 on the following page shows the work in this state.

What could this mean, I wondered. I saw a yearning to attend to vibrancy, joy, and presence, but how I was still conflating blackness and suffering. The thought occurred that perhaps I was "up to my waist" in a muck of White consciousness. I added stitches in black pen to stress the provisional nature of this work, a rupture in my learning about the Black experience and of authentic allyship. From week to week, my

Fig. 4 Mixed media painting exploring blackness/suffering



currere proceeded apace: From Rankine et al. (2016), I began recognizing that my imagination is not free of race, contrary to a trope of White writers that seems to suggest that imagination is not “created by the same web of history and culture that made ‘me’” (p. 15). On the idea of Blackness and suffering, I contemplated “that once one accepts that violence precedes and exceeds the Black, that it’s not situational violence or a conflict in civil society—that violence is the grammar that articulates ‘the carceral continuum of black life’ —then one has to take up the question of what it means to suffer” (Sharpe, 2016, as cited in Terreffe, 2016, p. 4). The construct of Blackness, as Knox (2021) describes in her forthcoming book, need not be homogenized, but instead can be thought of as a changing abstract prism of Black experience. Shauna enlarged my understanding of the Black experience in America today, in which statistically one “is to be aware that at any moment, one may be hunted and killed” (p 5). If I reach a point where I no longer equate Blackness and suffering, what then might I know of joy borne of suffering, past and present?

I have since added on to this curriculum, a lived curriculum, by thinking about Sharpe’s (2016) conceptualization of “the hold” and exceeding the hold. Sharpe writes of the hold as representing the Middle Passage, the ship’s literal hold, metaphorically conveying the “ongoing location of Black being” (p. 16). She poetically envisions a survival of the hold and ways of exceeding the hold—a way of living in the wake, the literal, materialistic wake of slave ships, of enslavement, amidst a climate of anti-Blackness and White supremacy, and where opportunity yet resides. I wrote in my notebook: *What does it mean for joy to exceed the hold?*

I'm also chastened by Sharpe's trenchant criticism of some Black authors, who try, she argues, to suggest a logic of the hold in order to assuage the anxiety of liberal Whites (like me) (Terrefe, 2016). I'm learning that radical criticality demands that I turn down my White gaze, that I listen actively and openly to understand to the best of my ability an ontology of Blackness. The more reading and listening I do, the more nuanced becomes my state of knowing and unknowing. In allyship, my writing and art, both wittingly and unconsciously autobiographical, are obligatory incitements to rupture.

Editorial comments and discussion in our writing group raised more questions for me than answers about the curricular possibilities of a praxis of reverie, art, and hard history. Jason asked me how to operationalize reverie and art, for example, helping to give weight to this question: How might a praxis of reverie with art help students to deepen their engagement with hard history? I talked about the perils: Such artmaking is a risky endeavor, for allowing painful themes to come into the mind, to potentially allow such ideas to invade one's psyche and to stir feelings about intolerable, unspeakable suffering. A praxis of reverie and art is also risky due to the common compulsion in the field to attempt to replicate (as an evidence-based practice, say) or to operationalize (as a lesson plan, say) something that is in essence effable and irreducible. Knowing the risks and intriguing possibilities, I'm still asking if it can be possible in education to allow *more time* for thoughtful reflection, for reverie, where painful knowledge can be symbolized through art, be it visual or linguistic. And if not, why not.

I wrote earlier how my work with history and art animates Farley's (2009) contentions about the disruption of meaning inherent in working with the traumas of hard history. I also agreed with her reference to Winnicott (1971) on a third transitional space of play as a means for hope—mainly with regard to working with children, but also in a personal praxis of art and reverie that allows for creative risk-taking, productive disruptions, and the potential for symbolization and meaning-making. Here, I'd like to offer how my work in the Racial Justice Education Writing Group (RJEWC) also represents a safe, third transitional space. In the group, I'm able to talk about difficult experiences, both old and new, and to benefit from an intersubjective interplay of ideas and feedback. Jason and Shauna are never anything but supportive and direct with me. When I tentatively brought artwork that explored internally racist imagery, they thanked me for my courage to address and redress early conditioning. With respect to my scholarship and writing, the group has helped me to grow in two main ways: The first is by learning how to explain myself out loud. So much of academic thinking and writing happens solipsistically and internally but having to converse about one's ideas and writing choices is essential for gaining clarity and certitude. This takes practice. The second is in response to urgings for me to assert my voice more assuredly, to be in conversation

with the scholars I cite, and to lean into opportunities extend or diverge from their theories. Jason and Shauna's insightful feedback challenges me to become a better thinker, to read more widely, and to take risks on their behalf and mine, attributes I'm carrying forward into my recent conference writing on hard history and wordless narratives.

Our Lived Curriculum

The weeks pass. We read, we live, we write. The currere of our writing group emerges as we come together in dialogic encounters and move apart to learn and journey privately about hard history and anti-racist theory and praxis. We bring our work to a space of intersubjective investigation that affords an opportunity to enlarge our own and our collective understanding by thinking together across such theories as critical race and geography, psychoanalysis, curriculum, decolonialism, subalternity, and Buddhism. We meet at times euphoric and at times weary from the effort. Writing and speaking about racial justice requires an emotional and intellectual labor that is strenuous, more so when necessary ruptures occur in thought and conversation.

What has become clear as we approach our one-year mark is the unfinished character of our work together. Even though, on the one hand, we can measure our practice in distinct page counts of finished (and published or forthcoming) work, what occurs in conversation is immeasurable. Much thought-provoking commentary reverberates long beyond our hour-long weekly meetings. The time I (Jason) spent writing with Leslie and Shauna has offered me a number of ways to consider autobiography. One way is explicitly as currere considered in Shauna's writing and the shared labor of review and discussion of Pinar (2011) and Taliaferro Baszile (2015), alongside Shauna's (2021) emergent contributions to thinking about possibilities of currere for liberatory discourse and praxis. Another is through the ongoing parsing of our respective histories and in-group-time relating of subjective experience and understanding. These opportunities have impressed upon me curricular possibilities now emerging across my studio, writing and teaching practices. I am grateful for these dialogic encounters and eager to explore further strategic permutations in each context. This is especially urgent given the revelation of possibilities for more "constructive dialogic encounters," with audiences of my art and critical writing, perhaps profoundly challenged by confrontations with Buddhist discursive provocations, and my colleagues and students who might enjoy the opportunity to relate autobiographical understandings of race and its operations in our community.

When Jason and Shauna talk about the unthinkability of the horrors of slavery, I (Leslie) ask myself why I focus on such hard histories and what does it mean to bring this writing to them. I ask myself questions like: Whom I'm writing for; how much personal history and ignorance should I discuss; and how is my work anti-

racist? These are good and necessary questions, but also fraught. I take some comfort in recognizing that my uncertainty may be in keeping with the pedagogy of suffering that Jardine, McCaffrey, and Gilham (2015) discuss as one characterized by a “turning towards a measure of suffering and endurance and transformation” (p. 2). Although Jardine, McCaffrey, and Gilham see a paradoxical pleasure in this stance, by contrast I see and feel mostly struggle. And yet I recognize too the pedagogical imperative of opening an encasement (Jardine, McCaffrey, and Gilham, 2014, p. 9)—an encasement in my case of Whiteness unexamined and of otherness unapprehended. I show up to our group in spite of my personal anguish, to witness, to listen, and to learn from the truth of Jason and Shauna’s unique, brilliant, passionate, brave, and critical voices.

The opportunities offered by our shared praxis of externalized subjectivity, in the context of writing together towards decolonial and anti-racist projects, and in dialogic relation with a range of theory and experience, engender new notions for our respective and wide-ranging practices. We may recognize possibilities for autobiography or we may explore an irreducible experience, all in one group meeting. Within our writing group, our encounters with explicit notions of currere as decolonial theory alongside implicit reckonings with a currere as autobiography affords such generative reflections.

This oft-quoted question may in fact be the wind on our backs: What knowledge is of most worth (Schubert, 1985). In our group, what has been and continues to be most worthy is an epistemology of anti-racism, acquired through the subjective, the social, and through reciprocal relationship. Most worthwhile for us has also been to support each other’s unique, full-throated voices, for “passion is the lifeblood of the fire; it is the intensity of desire that inspires hope that inspires courage that results in action—albeit in diverse forms” (Taliaferro Baszile, 2006, p. 12). This might as well be the lived curriculum of the Racial Justice Writing Collective writ large, and a resource that is possible for others to emulate and recreate in their own way.

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