

# It Might Just Be Ravens Writing in Mid-Air

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## A Small Start

And the children in the apple-tree  
Not known, because not looked for  
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness  
Between two waves of the sea.

T. S. Eliot, from Quartet No. 4, Section 5 of “Four Quartets” (lines 36–39)

But then something about the sentence that followed stuck out. *As a kid, I was just a kid.* It sounds like a line from a Bill Callahan song. Is he saying, “Let’s leave that alone,” because there is something deeper he doesn’t want to discuss, or is it that there is really nothing there? Does it matter?

Mark Richardson (2013, n.p.) from “A Window That Isn’t There: The Elusive Art of Bill Callahan”

**I**T MATTERS, but just *how* it matters and *how much* and *to whom* and *to what end* is not just a tough call but a call that needs to be considered again and again, at every turn of circumstance. This is part of the sweet frustration of the interpretive life, that there is no single declaration. Stories get retold in the bury of the circumstances that call for them. And the pedagogical art of sensing that call is itself a practice, part of whose efficacy and worth is linked intimately to the very tale it considers.

Thus, the places, the locales of consideration—with all their convoluted stories and memory and fantasy and desire and inhabitants—have something to say, here, too. An interpretive consideration of my “self,” like my consideration of any other considered matter, is not aimed at:

a “thing” with properties to be discovered and named under regimes of “control, prediction and manipulation” (Habermas, 1972, p. 21), but is, rather, a long, contested, and emergent lineage of images, ideas, choices, possibilities, oclusions, inclusions, victories, defeats, silences and voices. The object being considered by interpretive work *is* this very various-

ness. “Only in the multifariousness of voices does it exist” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 284). (Jardine, 2019b, p. 20)

Thus, Ravens being nearby, eyeing, can change everything, as can the exhilaration of reading such a lovely line, noting it, citing it, here, now, as a gesture of whiling and remembering, and singing back. Thus, too, the language of interpretive work swirls and dips, not because it is a poetic consideration of something simple, clear, and straightforward, but because its object *is* multifarious, voiced and re-voiced from the angles of trees and Ravens and other lives’ sounds. Its object calls for a type of expression that tries to cleave well to and to find its measure in that very object.

### A Second Start

A clear, old, August memory of the rail clickities of trains in the distance, dimming light, coming sleep, open hot summer windows, yells of the older kids still up and about, green and young, and easy curtains revealing and curtailing what breeze there was. Backyard apple boughs and peach.

Those are the very trains I’d watch roar, sitting squat small boy on the side-track loading docks along the building’s south wall, weekends, Burlington, Ontario, when my father would take me to the factory to explore the great and grinding and loud and smelling-of-printing-inks-and-ketone machines as he did his foreman rounds.

Salt pills by the water fountain.

Half-ton rolls of paper you could smell when the machines heated them up.

Polish accents finding wee me a moment of joy relief in their labors of the day, and me, them, too.

And the fact that I’m old enough to have seen in-service *steam trains* go by at all. I didn’t imagine this, right? There is a dream-blur to boy-days and 69 years of times and days and daydreaming and stories told and heard and dreamt all mixed with others’ lives and their tells and mine.

I am most certainly and reliably a bit of an uncertain and unreliable witness to my very own life.

Click. *As a kid*

And, of course, exactly how uncertain and how unreliable is not for me to answer without duplicity, without, all at once, too much and too little at stake in the game of telling.

Clack. *I was just a kid.*

Single headlight seen at first, train-brightening with cycloptic dream-excitement, and then the great approach of noisy rhythmic chm-chm whooshes and that always-sudden moment of rush-by—with their great hinged armed elbows pushing the wheels and the plume of black, black, black smoke trailing up and over, having just pulled out of the Brant Street Station stop 4 miles west, working hard against inertia for a new head of steam. Part of this a black-and-white Max Fleisher stretched cartoon, full of animated and elongated Saturday-morning-jazz-ghosts.

And the Doppler pitch-drop whistle blows in the whiz-by. Factory sat at the Guelph Line level-crossing. Trains audible miles south, Delaware Avenue bedroom window, near enough to Lake Ontario that you could hear the fog horns some nights and see the sky redden from the slag dumps of the steel plants in Hamilton Harbour, formerly known as Burlington Bay.

### “One’s Story has been Stolen”

All this invokes, even in me, a least a bit of “So what?” As those involved in interpretive research and the long entrails of curriculum and place and our living relations to the work of teaching and learning as part of a life well-lived are finding more and more, *everybody* has had a life of some sort or other, *everybody* has a story or two or more, *everybody* hides and lies and distorts and exposes and blends and nurtures and taints, all in a jumble of intent and no intent at all. And this here story’s vague closeness and slight preciousness to me is not enough, by itself, for it to be *especially* worth the telling, let alone anyone else’s listening or reading, let alone worth even me remembering.

Interpretive work—hermeneutics and the curricula of place and relations and voice and story and life and earth and energy—summons a strange god:

When Hermes is at work ... one feels that one’s story has been stolen and turned into something else. The [person] tells his tale, and suddenly its plot has been transformed. He resists, as one would try to stop a thief.... “This is not what I meant at all, not at all.” But too late. Hermes has caught the tale, turned its feet around, made black into white, given it wings. And the tale is gone from the upperworld historical nexus in which it had begun and been subverted into an underground meaning. (Hillman, 1983, p. 31)

Such thievery can break the spell of the “compulsive fascination with my own case history” (Hillman, 2013, p. 30):

“The aim of interpretation, it could be said, is not just another interpretation but human freedom” (Smith, 1999, p. 29), hard-won and always in need of re-winning. And this is a freedom *from something* and a freedom, also, *on behalf of something*. It is a freedom from being “bound without a rope” (Loy, 2010, p. 42) to regnant ideas and beliefs, but it doesn’t proffer the simple negation of these ideas and beliefs but rather makes visible the causes and conditions of their arising. As goes an old hermeneutic saw, every text, every tale told, can be read as the answer to a question *that could have been answered differently* and therefore, every reading of every text is *possible*, not *necessary*, thus issuing a sort of relief from what appears to be intransigent, dominant confines. The hard-won insights that then arise will, of necessity, mean leaving certain things behind that will no longer support and encourage such precisely such freedom and alertness. It will mean looking foolish and starting all over again. The life-world is interpretable. But, too, my own most heartfelt “beliefs” and “feelings” and “opinions” and “experiences” become vulnerable to being read back to me in ways that I could not read them myself. This is true as much of the researcher as it is also true of the one who is the topic of one’s study. (Jardine, 2019b, p. 16)

But it is, therefore, vital to emphasize that, as a writer, *I am not Hermes*. I am not “the ‘god’ [*even*] of [*my*] own story” (Melnick 1997, p. 372, emphasis added) as per far too much of the contemporary self-noise. And this is true even (maybe even *especially*) of these silly stories of trains and summers and finches. Instead, I find myself *in these tales*, being told *by* them, not just telling them, out, somehow, in the wilds “beyond [*my*] wanting and doing” (Gadamer, 1989, p. xxviii), told by birds and the weight of wood carried.

I find that I'm the tell of a tale. Of remembering this sweet thing that I first spotted, then cited 27 years ago (Jardine, 1992, p. vii). The lovely two-breath phrase by Rick Fields (1990, p. xiv):

My heart is broken  
Open.

It is strange to have a memory stretched back along a stretch of writing itself bent to "make memory last," a phrase that itself just now flitted by from nowhere. I went to look for it, as has become an old habit. To make sure it was still safe and sound. *Truth and Method*, Hans-Georg Gadamer (1989), citing G. W. F Hegel. And hah! Look at this:

[Writing] can detach itself from the mere continuance of the vestiges of past life, remnants from which one human being can by inference piece out another's existence. [Writing] does not present us with only a stock of memorials and signs. [It, like many arts] has acquired its own contemporaneity with every present. To understand it does not mean primarily to reason one's way back into the past, but to have a present involvement in what is said. (p. 391)

### **"As if Illuminated"**

*As a kid, I was just a kid.* Yes, it does sound like a Bill Callahan lyric. But there is another lyric. Bill Callahan (1999, recording as Smog), "Teenage Spaceship," from the CD *Knock Knock*. When I first heard this song, I sent it to an old friend with only this note: "I know *exactly* what this means."

Sometimes I need to recite a citation as a chance to breathe the breath of another life and then perhaps come back to myself with better means because of it. Oxygenated like water tumbled over rapid rocks and steepes.

Can I have these lyrics as my very own story, please? No, I can't even quote much of them without much hassle and expense (even though I can effortlessly do this: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=llaeAbTSo\\_k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=llaeAbTSo_k)). This song perfectly tells an utterly intimate secret *about my very own life* that I had never before quite imagined having lived. And it does so precisely because of the decades and decades of distance now both collapsed and distended. It is profoundly nearby and only heard at a great murk of distance. The weird shock, not only of recognition, but of being suddenly and sharply and unexpectedly *recognized*:

We do not understand what recognition is in its profoundest nature if we only regard it as knowing something again that we already know. The joy of recognition is rather the joy of knowing *more* than is already familiar. In recognition, what we know emerges, as if illuminated. It is known *as* something. (Gadamer 1989, p. 114)

Joy, yes, but not just joy:

I need to remember my stories not because I need to find out about myself but because I need to found myself in a story that I can hold to be mine. I also fear these stories because

through them I can be found out, ... exposed. Repression is built into each story as the fear of the story itself, the fear of the closeness of the Gods in the myths which found me. Thus the art of [interpretation] requires skilful handling of memory, of case history, so that it can truly found. (Hillman, 1983, p. 42)

I listen to this song. It illuminates me just right, just here, years outstretched, and it illuminates some swollen creek through trees, others huddled around, hovering at night, worlds and worlds of images and lives and stories told and heard. Halves of centuries utterly unbelievably in-between.

### “Like Archaic Storytellers”

“Telling my story” and speaking of “places” sometimes feels far too literal for my tastes. It is a bit too abrupt, a bit too asthmatic for me, too claustrophobic. Its closeness and closedness doesn’t feel like intimacy. “This is my story.” Huh. It sometimes feels like confinement rather than release.

My life isn’t *inside of me*. There are lakes and trains and spaceships and finches, wild and mint. And Hegel, too, and Bill Callahan. And each one of these is itself not just itself but an ardent world of relations. Radiant beings. Illuminated.

So, to cite these lyrics, these passages, to tell these funny little stories, is to relieve me of some confine of myself, even for just a while. It is to feel myself not just experiencing, but *experienced* from afar and then, bright headlight, suddenly brought near and whooshed by into the Doppler drop of sound memory, “less stuck in the case without a vision of its soul” (Hillman, 1983, p. 28).

Eyed by the Raven at the feeder, not just birdwatching.

It is to exhale and take a breath deep of summerair seaweed and Lake Carp and flushed goldfish now orangeflash lake monsters and Burlington boy-buckets of caught smelts swimming up Rambo Creek and brought home for the rose bushes.

Those trains and memory curtains, deep yellow sunset flickers through branches of Eva and Harry’s back yard trees late summer evenings. I was just a kid, picking mustard-colored rose-bugs from the peonies and doing terrible experiments in sealed jars. Life and death arced in my hands and in their squirms for escape.

And then this, written twenty years ago after my first return from Alberta back to Southern Ontario where I was raised:

How things smell, the racket of leaves turning on their stems, how my breath pulls this humid air, how birds songs combine, the familiar directions of sudden thundery winds, the rising insect drills of cicada tree buzzes that I remember so intimately, so immediately, that when they sound, it feels as if this place itself has remembered what I have forgotten, as if my own memory, my own raising, some of my own life, is stored up in these trees for safe keeping. Cicadas become archaic storytellers telling me, like all good storytellers, of the life I’d forgotten I’d lived, of deep, fleshy, familial relations that worm their ways out of my belly and breath into these soils, these smells, this air. And I’m left shocked that they know so much, that they remember so well, and that they can be so perfectly articulate. (Jardine, under consideration).

Autobiography porous like  
skin webbed in deep  
Earthwater pushripples.  
(Jardine, 1992, p. 40)

## Остранение

It was no thought or word that called culture into being, but a tool or a weapon. After the stone axe we needed song and story to remember innocence, to record effect—and so to describe the limits, to say what can be done without damage. (Berry, 1975/2019, p. 665)

It may be that the familiar only becomes visible and speakable in its truth once it is disrupted and, thereby, only once our sheer living in its embrace becomes sometimes-suddenly estranged in a rush-by of cold air under the wings of the everyday. The pop up causes a halt of breath—*aesthesis*—and can set off a nerve shot out of neurasthenic day-dragging. It is the smell of something feral run off into a life of its own. Energeia. Aliveness. Teenage Spaceship. I get it.

Now to follow this scent without betrayal or usurp or damage is the difficult, practical task of hermeneutics. In fact, part of this task is documenting precisely the lesson that the place teaches about such following. Seeing [*gnosis*] through [*dia*] the place is seeing the place for what it is, and not simply casting it in my own image wrought from living *in* that place. *Being in place* is not enough, and seeing through, diagnosis, is not a habitual recapitulation of the habitual, a droning, familiar repeating of the familiar, a levelling account of levelling. It is not just a meander through the old and the familiar, but a laying down of the nets and a leaving of one's family behind in order, ironically, to experience *these very matters* in proper proportion, beautifully.

In interpretive work, all this has been gathered under a phrase that, ironically, has become flat and all-too easy to toss off offhandedly: “making the familiar strange.” It originated as “defamiliarization,” *ostranenie* (Russian: *остранение*) in a 1917 essay by Viktor Shklovsky (1917/1965), “Art as Technique”:

Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war. Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists ... to make the stone *stony*. (p. 12)

So too with the art of interpretation. To recover the sensation of life over and against the neurasthenia of the day-to-day distraction, absorption, and exhaustion of living itself:

One of the threads of hermeneutic insight is that human consciousness tends towards a certain sleepiness and lethargy and who cares? and what difference does it make? regarding the ancestral currents that “bear us forward in their fine, accurate arms” (Wallace, 1989, p. 49). Lethargy, *Lethe*, forgetfulness, lethality. A certain “weakness” (Greek, *astheneia*) and heaviness and blandness and flatness and closure, where potentiality, possibility, interpretability, questioning, and venture, seem not only too exhausting to contemplate but, worse yet, simply uncalled-for in light of what moribundly “is.” [see Aho, 2018, Jardine, 2019a] It was Martin Heidegger (1962) who first gave contemporary hermeneutics hints of the numbing effects of what he called “idle talk,” (p. 211 ff.) “levelling down” (p. 127) and the stitched-up-mouths effects of the “it goes without saying” and “everybody knows” and



“that’s life” familiarities that come from the sways of the “they-self” (p. 163 ff.). (Jardine, 2019a, p. 45)

I take a different approach to the question of what truth, *aletheia*, or unconcealment, really means. I invoke the concept of *energeia* here, which has a special value because in dealing with it we are no longer moving in the realm of sentence truth. With this new conceptual word Aristotle was able to think a motion [a movement, motility, animation] ... something like life itself, like being aware, seeing, or thinking. All of these he called “pure *energeia*” (Gadamer, 2007, p. 213)

### The Hermeneutic Two-Step and then, The Leap

First, “something awakens our interest—that is really what comes first!” (Gadamer 2001, p. 50). I don’t stop. I get *stopped*, and this stop is “energizing,” “enlivening.” A finch in a wild mint vest flies by, and I corral it in words and then see what happens next. I quote the line and let it rest a while and see if it nestles, see if it starts to sing.

And there is no method, here, no secret, other than, with practice, cultivating a certain expectancy regarding the abundance of one’s living found, often, in its most mundane turns—a CD review, a lyric, an offhand comment or flit of memory, an old story re-told with just enough verve to perk and awaken and induce flight:

The whole leap depends on the slow pace at the beginning, like a long flat run before a broad jump. Anything that you want to move has to start where it is, in its stuckness. That involves erudition—probably too much erudition. One wants to get stuck in the history, the material, the knowledge, even relish it. I gobble everything up, and it gives me appetite to go on. I wouldn’t really know what I want to say ... until I’ve eaten a lot so that my writing is part of a digesting and spitting out what other people say and getting caught by the whole complete of it. Deliberately spending time in the old place. Then suddenly seeing through the old place. (Hillman, 1991, p. 154)

This first origin of hermeneutic work is life-bound, circumstantial, non-replicable happenstance. It is also a secret of the hermeneutic art of teaching, “to find that opening in each of us” (Wallace, 1989, p. 13), not by searching our persons, but by finding the open territories of the tale told that might allow each of us to open out into it and perhaps take flight a bit. Curriculum topics as living topographies, places, territories, full of energies and ways. An old idea.

Second, slowly starting to move *towards* this perking happenstance with an eye to taking it seriously and seeing where it might lead, what places it might inhabit and lead me towards. Where, if anywhere. Ground level animal sense. Grunt work. Waiting, asking around in anticipation. Interpretation fails when it becomes a self-involved, soaring flight up and away from its starts and startles.

Most often, things trail off, scents fail. Red herrings dragged across the path. “It would not deserve the interest we take in it if it did not have something to teach us that we could not know by ourselves” (Gadamer, 1989, p. xxxv), but knowing that it might thus be deserving is a *consequence of taking it seriously* as much as it is a *cause of taking it seriously*. This is the great, intimate, contradictory, and risky first dance of hermeneutic attentiveness. Feeling the grave,

detailed, livid resistance to the leap, expressing how fecund is the individual case that provides gravity to the tale being told.

Hence the risk. It might come to nothing. It might take flight. Insight might come, words might come or notes and melodies. It might, too, and just as easily, fly too high and burn up into ashes.

### Amazed at the Mazes of Years

So here we go again, recorded 20 years after “Teenage Spaceship”: Bill Callahan (2019b) “Young Icarus,” from the CD *Shepherd in a Sheepskin Vest* (Line 1–4) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=owpqArysd-1>). Parallel lines and parallel lives.

Hovering at night.

I did gasp at this lyric, too, as it bypasses the all-too-familiar sun-soaring of the daytime comeuppance flight for which Icarus is well-known. Icarus flew all the time at night. A bit like a Teenage Spaceship, perhaps.

But that Icarus led a nightlife, out of sight of the sun that might tempt him too high, might tempt him to look away from the maze he was born into. This is an old reminder, a warning to those involved in the tough nails of interpretive work. An all-too-familiar life become strange, because now the too-well-known and too-well-worn, old Greek story of not aspiring too high has an unexpected howl and buzz in it: night flights, hovering, a teenage spaceship, peering downward, around, and all about. Amazed at the mazes of so many years, stitching graves, feeling dark wings nearby.

It might just be Ravens writing in mid-air.

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# Pedagogical Pivoting, Emergent Curriculum, and Knowledge Production But Just Don't Call It Social Justice

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IN HER WIDELY SHARED ARTICLE, “Elementary Education Has Gone Terribly Wrong,” appearing in the August 2019 issue of *The Atlantic*, journalist Natalie Wexler argues convincingly that school curriculum too often exclusively focuses on skill acquisition at the expense of engaging with knowledge. Wexler suggests that a lack of knowledge engagement has had detrimental effects on children in U.S. schools. For those of us engaged in curriculum research, or for that matter for anyone who has spent time with young people in an elementary classroom, this is of no surprise. That children are motivated by and respond to curriculum that is relevant to their lives and is responsive to their curiosities and contexts is not a radical concept. But as Wexler details, most schools do not organize the learning opportunities for students or the teaching expectations for teachers based on a knowledge-rich environment. Instead, schooling, particularly for students who come from lower income and communities of color, has focused on skill-based and repetition-oriented approaches. The premise that students need to have such “basics” or skills before they can engage in knowledge acquisition, let alone knowledge production, lacks not only a research basis, but also harms children by stifling their learning opportunities in the process. Inquiry-based approaches to teaching and learning have been marginalized for decades in lieu of standards-based approaches that decontextualize learning. Classroom learning more often than not rests on the idea that, “because you will need this next year,” students need to practice skills over and over before they can engage in more meaningful, worthwhile learning.

Wexler brings forward to a wide audience the idea that skills can be learned through engagement with knowledge. We argue even further: Students can learn skills as they engage in knowledge production and meaning making—rather than the focusing solely on skills through rote memorization or knowledge acquisition. And although Wexler wholly misses the opportunities to offer a critique of whose knowledge is valued and whose is marginalized or the premise for culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogy, her challenge, albeit incomplete (and resting on out-

of-date notions of cultural literacy), raises an important issue that illuminates significant shortcomings in how our society chooses to approach school curriculum.

Imagining an alternative to the often-scripted, listless curriculum and sharing possible obstacles is where we situate this article: namely making meaning of one teacher's perspectives on the journey of changing her pedagogical approach in her third-grade classroom and the naming or labeling of this approach. The teacher and second author of this article, Stephanie, is conscious to do what we are describing here as a pedagogical pivot. Specifically, we are interested in better understanding her shifts in approaching curriculum, the ways in which she engages with students as a teacher, and the complicatedness of context in doing so.

Stephanie seeks to pivot from a skill-acquisition, teacher-centered approach to one that honors the questions, curiosities, and interests of her eight- and nine-year-old students. The students become not only formidable experts on topics important to them, but they also become knowledge producers based on their interest in and capacity for digging deep into the topics they have chosen to explore and problems they are seeking to solve. This pivot challenges Stephanie's identity as a teacher, particularly when her students name issues important to their lives that contradict her understanding of developmentally appropriate curricular topics. As the students name issues that they want to tackle, subjects often grouped as social justice topics are unleashed. Whereas Stephanie is full-throated in wanting to support her students as she makes this transition, the transition itself is filled with concern, caution, and trepidation, despite the joyfulness, contemplation, reflection, and exuberance she shares in the pedagogical exploration. This is in part because of her shifting view of curriculum, challenges and skepticism from colleagues and administrators, and the explicit framing of the work as social justice teaching.

The context of high-stakes testing and outside mandates causes many teachers to find it exceedingly difficult to identify openings and opportunities to shift from rigid curricula to inquiry-based and emergent (Hopkins, 1954) forms of action-focused curricula that engage students with topics they name (Schultz, 2017). This article focuses, via narrative inquiry, on perspectives—drawn from a co-teaching experience—of Stephanie and a university professor, Brian, who worked together to adjust pedagogical approaches from a skill-acquisition approach to one that listened to and engaged young people (Noguera, 2003) around issues the students identified as most important. Narrative inquiry stories our contemplations and reflections on such an approach against the backdrop of colleague and administrative questioning, heightened accountability informed by interpretations of current educational policy, and notions of “doing curriculum as usual” without questioning who decided and why that is ubiquitous in the United States.

The narrative specifically illustrates Stephanie's pedagogical pivot to explore emergent, contextual, and action-focused curriculum while resisting labeling the approach as justice-oriented. Stephanie embraced this emergent approach as she could argue it was used as a means to support her students, focus curriculum on their concerns, realize standards prescribed from the outside, and be relevant and responsive to their questions. She saw how empowered her students became as achievements grew beyond the classroom. However, ideological differences, small town politics, reluctance about being labeled as an activist or liberal teacher, among other issues, caused Stephanie to resist theorizing about the work with a justice-oriented identity.

The significance here lies in a teacher going beyond simply changing pedagogy or covering justice-related topics. Both of these have been seen in many classrooms. Instead, Stephanie's transformation yields teaching practices that do not often occur—namely, that young students readily engage in an emergent, inquiry-based curricular approach leading to sustained, months-long projects centered on social justice topics that students themselves named.

## Democratic, Student-Centered, Culturally Relevant, and Social Justice Teaching

We draw on a long tradition of curriculum literature that focuses on student-centered learning, democratic teaching, and emergent curriculum. John Dewey's (1916) argument in *Democracy & Education*, that public schools are integral for students learning democratic processes, is cornerstone to how we think about our work. Central to Dewey's thesis is that schools must be sites where young people have opportunities to critically think, problem solve, and make decisions. In having such educational spaces, schools center students and become sites for them to learn how to work with one another and explore possibilities for answering questions. In line with Dewey's (1915) contention that schools should develop ways for students to work together, we situate this work in his argument that schools also must strive to be reflective of miniature communities.

Developing such community in schools was further articulated in Maxine Greene's (1986) interpretation of Dewey's ideal in her pathbreaking article, "In Search of a Critical Pedagogy." Greene suggested that, in such a community-oriented classroom, "there would be continuing and open communication, the kind of learning that would feed into practice, and inquiries arising out questing in the midst of life" (p. 434). When students have such opportunities in classrooms, particularly when their curiosities propel learning, the processes of democracy are practiced. In such classrooms, curriculum can emerge from the students (Hopkins, 1954); that is, the topics and issues taught within school could be generative of students' questions and ideas. Similarly, Paulo Freire's (1970/2000) theorizing that, when those who have the most at stake—in this case students—are able to engage with problems they have posed, curriculum can extend their critical consciousness and reflection and be an impetus to take action. Naming issues and taking action is important here; it is a space where students become both good analyzers of information and where they become producers of knowledge as they work to solve problems important to them.

The theoretical guidance offered by Dewey, Greene, Hopkins, and Freire provides a springboard for creating contemporary classrooms that are democratic, student-centered, problem-posing, and embrace an emergent curriculum. Many contemporary curricularists have taken these ideas to today's classroom context. For instance, Pedro Noguera (2003, 2008) argues that the promise of public education rests with schools that connect with and listen to the young people within them. Likewise, in *The Power of Their Ideas*, Deborah Meier (2002), one of the foremost contemporary proponents of progressive education, suggests that looking to students as essential decision-makers in their learning is not only critical to individual students' success but to that of the entire school community. Meier convinces followers and skeptics alike, through vivid examples in urban public schools she has led, of the deep potential of student-centered curriculum. Others, too, have made such a case. James Beane's (1997, 2005) efforts advocating for "curriculum integration" highlight how schools must be democratic and reflect the confluence of student concerns with societal issues. Beane, along with colleague Michael Apple (Apple & Beane, 2007), show a myriad of classroom possibilities in action where democratic practices are cornerstone. Bill Ayers' concepts of teaching toward freedom (2004) and teaching with conscience (2016) further the promise of imagining schools with students at the center. It is in such spaces, Ayers contends, that we can deliberate with students about curriculum and schooling and, in turn, affect societal change. Brian Schultz, too, has made the case for an action-focused, student-centered learning (2017) that listens to the topics and issues students find most worthwhile (2011).

Arguments that center students are inherently justice-oriented. All promote schooling that is both culturally relevant and contextually responsive. In her often-cited article, "But That's Just

Good Teaching,” Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) makes a convincing case for what she calls culturally relevant pedagogy. Reflective of the arguments that Dewey, Freire, and others made in their theoretical guidance, culturally relevant pedagogy also centers students and, importantly, their lives within the curriculum. Others have built on and complemented this work including making the case for culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 1998), culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2014, 2017), and anti-oppressive education (Kumashiro, 2000). These orientations to teaching and learning are emphatically social justice oriented because they take an explicit stance to honor the culture(s) of the students while adhering to critical, multicultural, equity-focused principles and working against oppressive ideas. They also demand high expectations through experiential, authentic, and practical activities. Social justice classrooms connect students’ lives with the materials, topics, and experiences of the classroom. Political, economic, and social matters are not removed from the curriculum, but instead become a part of how classroom curriculum gets enacted.

### Methodology

We provide polyvocal vignettes of our experiences working together in and out of the classroom. These vignettes offer glimpses through what we refer to as “narrative points-of-entry” (Schultz et al., 2010, p. 372). These points-of-entry detail what each of us considered as we came into this work, our pursuits and thoughts, and our reflections on engaging together in this different approach to teaching—an approach that resisted many of Stephanie’s assumptions from her previous 13 years of teaching. Likewise, Brian had only supported and encouraged teachers who had been his university students to practice this kind of work. Further, Brian had not previously co-taught in someone else’s classroom, and third-graders would be the youngest age group for whom he had developed action-focused curriculum.

These narrative points-of-entry were not prescribed. Instead, reflective of the curricular approach, the points-of-entry were initially derived from the experiences and the discussions Stephanie had with Brian. Brian then wrote his own points-of-entry that contrasted, complemented, and rounded out the storytelling. The intention is not to tell a complete story in either series of vignettes, but instead to tell a complicated series of nuanced stories that shed light on our experiences working together as well as the theorizing that occurred on our own about this work.

We present our narratives side-by-side to allow for both complementary and diverging polyvocal portrayals of our lived experiences (Lather & Smithies, 1997; Madda et al., 2012; Schultz et al., 2010). Although on the surface we had a shared experience of being present during the same co-teaching moments, our interpretations are highly individualized, reflecting previous experiences and perspectives of the role of teacher, on what curriculum is and ought to be, and how to engage in a student-led curriculum that satisfies outside expectations. Our narratives speak for themselves where “more than one person’s voice is presented” to “avoid writing from the perspective of the ultimate ethnographic authority” (Nelson, 2017, p. 21). This practice lets us disrupt exacting, authoritative, and precise writing done by professors who enter others’ classrooms while providing a space for us “to interact on more equal footing” (Tobin & Davidson, 2006, p. 271). These polyvocal narratives demonstrate not only diversity of perspective, but also divergence caused by our varying positionalities as we write about and make meaning about the same experience(s) (Gershon, 2009).

In positioning the narratives in a side-by-side display, the reader has an opportunity to explore the storytelling in a multiplicity of ways: linearly for each author, toggling between each of our points-of-entry, or beginning and ending at any single point-of-entry. Because the vignettes were not prescribed, the exact number of entries and their corresponding lengths do not match. Importantly, though, positioning the narratives in such a way is intended to make the reader adjust to how the stories are presented. Storying this experience may cause a reader to adjust to discomfort and adjust to a different way of reading narrative(s). We acknowledge that adjusting in this way may make a reader uneasy. The differing viewpoints of the same experience is parallel to how classrooms are often interpreted, in this case prompting a reader, much like a classroom participant or observer, to determine how best to make meaning.

### Data Sources

A multiplicity of data informs the vignettes and makes meaning of the discussion and conclusion. These data include a reflection journal Stephanie kept while engaging in this work, semi-structured and informal interviews, and ongoing discussions and conversations between Stephanie and Brian. These occurred face-to-face and over phone, email, and text messaging. Further, Stephanie engaged in the teaching and learning process with access to student work from her classroom, and Brian spent multiple days per week over multiple months volunteering in Stephanie's classroom. This provided Brian with opportunities to make informal observations of ongoing classroom pursuits.

### Side-By-Side Narrative Points-of-Entry

<b>I'll Teach Later</b>	<b>Running (from) Records</b>
<p>When Brian first asked to help in the classroom, I asked him to give district-mandated <i>Running Records</i> to students—a lame responsibility I was all-too-grateful to pass on. But he endured the task and continued to reach out, and now sat at my table. I was enthusiastic by what he was offering, but apprehensive, too.</p> <p>Though a guest in my space, he was in a position of some power at the local university and a parent of one of my new students. He was also a great resource for my many questions about how to make space for students to have their ideas and curiosities drive the curriculum in my classroom. I struggled with how to twist my apprehension into helpful questions. How could I name</p>	<p>Sunday nights were the worst. Our 8-year-old was having a tough time with the adjustment. He begged, pleaded with us to head back to Chicago. He wanted what was familiar. He wanted to go back to his old school. His school had been different: no textbooks, no grades, no tests or quizzes, and no prescriptive curriculum. Instead, the children's questions, concerns, and interests guided an emergent and project-oriented approach to classroom teaching and learning.</p> <p>If I could spend some time in Mrs. Pearson's third-grade classroom, I thought, I might have an opportunity to influence how curriculum and pedagogy were enacted in her classroom. But aside from such hopefulness and without getting ahead of my</p>



what I was feeling? I knew honoring my students was right, and I wasn't satisfied by making canned curriculum "more fun" each week, but I couldn't envision an alternative. Blocking my conceptualization was the worry of many teachers: fear of test scores, making it all fit, and what kind (what skills and knowledge?) of students I would pass on to the next grade...

"What does it look like in the scope of a day? a week? How much time do I devote to this?" I manage.

"That's up to you. I'll come in; we'll launch it together."

Eagerly, but with trepidation I asked, "Well, when can we start?" Unspoken, "and when does it end? how does it fit?"

Maybe we'd do this a couple of days a week? I resolved to *teach* on the other days to fit in district pacing.

### Contemplating White Nationalism

I stood in the back of the room beside Brian and listened, "So here are the big problems the kids named yesterday, and today they'll vote on the one they want to solve the most," he motioned to the poster in front of us.

"They'll choose their groups based on the problems they name, voting on violence, natural disasters, sickness, pollution, school tests, bullying, and poaching," he points to each problem on the list as he speaks, which allows me to take notice when his hand skips over "White Nationalists/Civil Rights/Immigration."

I gave him a questioning look without turning my head to face him directly. "Did you mean to omit the White Nationalism problem?"

He hesitated. His voice even, "You don't seem comfortable with the idea."

presumptuous self, I really needed to help my own kid get adjusted to a new house, a new city, new friends, and, perhaps most importantly, a different approach to schooling.

Communicating with Mrs. Pearson early on, my wife and I let her know how we anticipated a struggle. Hesitant to critique her teaching, as we had enrolled him in the neighborhood public school, I offered to volunteer in her classroom in any way she found helpful. Being close to the school, I found it easy enough to step away from my university office to head over to the elementary school. Yet, I did not really know what I was in for.

She quickly took me up on the offer (and told me to call her Stephanie, too). She suggested I could start by doing some *Running Records* with her students. I admit I was unfamiliar with the practice (even though I had taught at the elementary level in Chicago), so much so I texted a literacy professor colleague to fill me in. But at that point, I was willing to do *anything* to ease the angst and lessen the tears on Sunday nights.

I cringed. Wondering if I was doing more harm than good, I shook my head indicating I could not help the young boy in front of me. I was in the school's hallway, working one-on-one with a third-grader from Stephanie's classroom. He repeatedly looked at me for guidance as he worked through a photocopied reading passage. My job doing the *Running Record* was to code and score his fluency on the clipboard Stephanie had prepared for me.

As I questioned my ability to continue "volunteering" in her room, I was still hopeful that together we could delve into more imaginative curricular work once I slogged through what felt like doing damaging things to young people.

I considered this. Why was I uncomfortable? Where should I start: This topic could become controversial for a teacher in this small town. Is it appropriate for 3rd-graders to research? How might parents react when they hear? How would my principal react? Still, a student wrote it, and shouldn't I honor that?

I swallowed. "Let's leave it on the list and let students vote on it," I say.

"You sure?"

"I am."

### Curriculum Meeting

"Let's get this party started," said Emily. Along with the other third grade teachers, we were touching base in my classroom before school started.

"Coming up in the program is point of view, drawing conclusions, and a prefix word study," Jen started as she consulted the teacher manual from our district's purchased curriculum. With exasperation she added, "I'm so far behind. I don't feel like my kids understand author's purpose from this week yet, but we're supposed to move on. What are you ladies going to do?"

"My kids aren't ready for drawing conclusions yet, and I know we hit that again later in the year," Emily considered. "But I really *do* want to do point of view. I found this great resource from a *Teachers Pay Teachers* with a super-cute mentor text and notebook activity."

"Oh you showed that to me!" Jen exclaimed. Turning to me, "I have the book if you want to borrow it. It's really good; much better than the text from our program."

"No doubt," I agreed flatly.

### Post-It Notes and (Creating) Problems

Each child was given a set of three *Post-It Notes*. The prompt was simple: Write down some things that really bother you and that you'd want to spend some time working to solve.

The students had been given the weekend to contemplate issues and topics that they felt were big problems in their community that needed fixing. During the previous week, Stephanie and I had begun our co-teaching.

We shared examples with the third graders. Stories and videos highlighted characters or real people working to solve an identified problem. Stopping pollution. Eliminating plastic bags. Deforestation.

We facilitated group discussions, leveraged activity sheets familiar to Stephanie and to her students to document the issues the students observed, and foreshadowed next steps.

Now, it was the students turn to share the issues they had identified. There were no constraints. No boundaries. Simply write down your issues on the pieces of paper, the eight-year-olds were told.

Peering over the kids' shoulders as they sat in desk clusters around the room, the students were naming all sorts of issues that bothered them. Animal cruelty. Immigration. Natural disasters. Cheap cereal. Pollution. Itchy haircuts. Poaching. White Nationalism.

Yes. *Stopping White Nationalism* was one of the most pressing issues that one young boy named. And, he wanted it to be solved.

As this curriculum began to play out, was I stoking a fire and creating more problems than any of us were ready for?

“Here, I printed you a copy,” Emily handed me a stack of papers. Complete with bordered clip art, the papers were cut-and-glue activities to use with our students.

I smiled tightly, “Thank you.” They *were* cute. Can’t curriculum be cute and rigorous too? If a *good* resource is out there, we don’t need to invent the wheel...

“How did your class do last week with author’s purpose, Stephanie?” Jen asked me. “I swear, when mine were analyzing text they couldn’t tell the difference between inform and persuade.”

“That *is* tricky to distinguish,” I conceded. “Often times texts may do both of those things.”

“Yeah, some of them even confused me! How much extra time are you spending on it? I swear I just don’t know how to fit it all in.”

I hesitated, “It’s a tough balance for sure. I am wondering if that skill even needs too much focused attention. It’s only part of the big reading picture, and we can weave it into any text discussion throughout the year,” I offered.

Jen twisted her mouth in thought. “Maybe ... Are you going to work on it anymore?”

“My kids have a good sense of purpose and message when we read articles about our topics,” I answered carefully.

“Gosh yeah those topics! I don’t know about that,” she pursed her lips. “I just don’t feel comfortable with students talking about those things in my classroom.”

Jen looked to Emily, who joined, “Yeah, I don’t think my students really care much about poaching. Certainly not White Nationalism, but if you can make it work that’s awesome.”

My coworkers were experiencing the same doubts I had. But of course their students

### Point and Click Curriculum

The example Stephanie shared with me was troubling. The materials pulled from a popular teacher resource website was not simply a promising tool being misused, but rather they were problematic activities that a fifth-grade teacher in her school had put in front of kids. They espoused blatantly inaccurate historical information about the Holocaust. Students were engaging with misinformation. And it was coming from their teacher.

The teacher had found what she thought was a great resource to complement the social studies textbook. Using a common source many teachers do, she had found a teacher-written account of Germany post-World War II on the website, *Teachers Pay Teachers*. The curriculum author or teacher-now-paid-curriculum-developer sold her version of history over this website to unaware teachers, including Stephanie’s colleague. The colleague in turn shared it with students.

With quick Internet search, any teacher can find activities on websites like *Pinterest* that are sure to “capture” their students’ attention. Likewise, they can pay opportunistic “colleagues” looking to make a buck through forums like *Teachers Pay Teachers*. The materials are only vetted by the purchasers.

Stephanie shared this with me in the context of our conversations where teachers are always searching for ways to supplement basal texts and find ways to connect with their students. Unfortunately, the lack of vetting and perhaps the inadequate content knowledge of teachers causes them to often find simple, easy to implement resources that are lacking. Stephanie had pointed out earlier that these sorts of resources were often “the right tools in the wrong hands.” I am not so sure they are even the right tools.

weren't talking about issues important to them, because space wasn't made in the classroom to do so. My students' topics surprised me also. But they came *from the students*. How could I argue with that?

"I brought some of the resources I made with my class these last few weeks to help share what we're working on. While working, the students definitely have to consider point of view and author's purpose," I offered my plain documents, created alongside students and relating to those "risky" social justice topics.

"Thank you," their voices together forced gratitude with a higher pitch.

There was a pause.

We all wrestled with how to move forward past the unease. Emily switched the subject to math to wrap up our meeting.

As my students filed in to start the day a few minutes later, I noticed the papers I had shared forgotten at the desks where my colleagues had sat.

### **Lucky for the Opportunity**

"Hey, Brian is coming by today if you want to pop in the classroom and see what's happening," I leaned into my principal's office one morning.

"Oh yeah? I'm sure whatever you guys are doing is great," he shifted in his chair.

My principal is big on relationships with his staff. He's in classrooms every day, visible to students, and approachable to all. This clipped response was out of character.

"It is...?" I probed, then let the silence between us build.

He broke it, "Yeah. I love the relationship with the university," flashing a smile and

Natalie Wexler, in *The Atlantic* piece that we cited to open this article, pointed to a recent RAND study (Opfer et al., 2017) that, in part, analyzed how often teachers seek classroom curriculum materials in this way. The study's authors cited that math and ELA teachers working in low-income schools consulted the internet for help with instruction at unbelievably high rates: 98% had leveraged *Google*, 80% used *Pinterest*, and 77% had visited *Teachers Pay Teachers*. In more affluent schools, the numbers are only 3–4% lower (Opfer et al., 2017, p. 40).

There has been much written about the problematic nature of textbook content. From popular press detailing this in the *New York Review of Books* (Collins, 2012) to more academic renderings like *A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present* (Zinn, 2005), *Lies My Teachers Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (Loewen, 2018a), and *Teaching What Really Happened: How to Avoid the Tyranny of Textbooks and Get Students Excited About Doing History* (Loewen, 2018b), the issues of what and whose knowledge students are exposed to is of paramount importance. That students are rarely exposed to histories and perspectives of marginalized groups should be of no surprise. But that these inadequate big house publishing companies' books and select large state governments' decisions are being supplemented by misinformed, undereducated, ignorant, or even by individuals seeking to oppress certain groups should cause alarm.

### **Coaching Controversy**

The irony was not lost on me.

standing to face me. “It’s good PR, it’s innovative teaching, looks good,” he was showing good support, but the spiel sounded rehearsed.

“The kids are learning a lot too, and they’re so into it. I’m holding myself accountable to the standards and making sure...”

“I know you are. I don’t doubt your leadership and teaching,” he broke in.

I narrowed my eyes slightly. “What do you think about their chosen topics?” I asked slowly.

I watched his jaw clench and his smile fade. I had found the root of this awkward exchange. A small sigh, “My son loves hockey. He loves video games. He doesn’t think about stuff like this,” he squared his stance at me honestly. “I don’t know if he should.”

There it was—some of my fears spoken aloud. When *are* children ready to tackle social justice issues? Are only some kids talking about this stuff at home?

“Do you think the topics are inappropriate? The kids chose them themselves. We’re not going into gory detail. I’m keeping the classroom safe,” I reassured, trying not to sound defensive or surprised.

“I know.”

I breathed relief at his understanding and support.

“You’re *lucky* I’m *letting* you do this. I still see it as a good learning opportunity for you and the kids.”

I blinked. “Right. Thanks. Well, if you want to see what’s happening you know you’re welcome anytime,” I retreated.

The local NAACP chapter named Stephanie as one of two recipients of their Diversity Educator of the Year for the powerful teaching she was doing in her classroom.

Even though Stephanie wrestled with how the curriculum “got away from her” and questioned how much other people could or should get involved in the curriculum, she chose to stand by her students and the topics they had chosen.

The curriculum had indeed pushed beyond the four walls of her classroom. As the curriculum entered the public sphere, parents did get more involved, and the media began paying attention. As an insider/outsider, I watched as some supportive parents (particularly about the named causes of the students) became more involved than perhaps Stephanie initially felt comfortable with or knew how to engage. And Stephanie’s frustration was easy to hear when articles were written about her students without her direct input.

Not only were the students featured multiple times in the university’s student newspaper (Brustoski, 2018; Doyle, 2018; Editorial Board, 2018), but the local newspaper also featured Stephanie and her innovative curriculum (Ratterman, 2018). Other people outside her classroom were telling the story of what was happening within her classroom.

Looking to students to name issues and topics that are of most concern to them is bound to raise interest from those outside the classroom. And the issues that the students named raised controversial matters. Kids undoubtedly suggest ideas that matter to them most, even when others may not think they are age-appropriate. In this case, the young peoples’ concerns could be considered taboo or out of bounds for school.



### A Curriculum with Legs Can Walk All Over You

My student Max strode into the classroom, reached into his backpack, and proudly presented a newspaper to me, a publication from the student body of the local university. Pictured, largely on the front page, were my three students from the Stop White Nationalism group and a headline that framed, “Community Holds ‘Not in Our Town’ Interest Meeting.” This meeting is part of a movement that attempts to stop hate, racism, and bullying and promote safe communities. With some of my eight-year-old students and their families attending, the media was keen to pick it up as a story.

“Hey that’s great!” I exclaimed, eyes widening in surprise. And anxiety.

“Wow you guys are famous!” another student cheered. A small crowd of third graders was gathering. Everyone wanted to see. Even my reluctant readers wanted to get their hands on that paper. As the students crowded around to read the article, I felt the walls squeezing in too, my pulse quickening as I tried to understand what the paper meant and how I felt about it.

I skimmed the front-page, above the fold article. As I read on to the second page, another large photo showed the boys presenting their work at the meeting. Using the boys’ research on White Nationalism as an emotional attention grab to open the article, it detailed the local community’s motivations in holding an interest meeting.

“*Well-done, student author,*” I admitted.

Outwardly, I painted on my smile. It was a moment for celebrating learning for my students, many of whom had never even held a newspaper in their hands. I let them delight in the respect garnered from adults in the

Stephanie’s willingness to take on issues that her students named is important. Her willingness to work alongside them to answer questions and help take on their most important issues takes courage. And it is worthy of awards and recognition.

But importance and courage present teachers with scenarios that open them up for challenges from colleagues, administrators, parents, and community members.

Being alongside her students meant that, as they attracted attention from the public related to their work, Stephanie was inevitably along for the ride. Her contemplations about who is in charge of the curriculum raises critical questions about emergent curriculum, especially when topics are front and center in the public sphere.

Having had my own classroom teaching experiences called into question, I felt that I could offer her some counsel on this. But, importantly, I taught in a time that seems like long before social media was so commonplace and “going viral” was not in our collective vernacular.

Whereas such concerns and how to deal with them can be transferable across the landscape of different classrooms and different schools, how a teacher makes sense of her own situation is going to be unique and deeply contextual.

Suggesting Stephanie should check out an old *Rethinking Schools* article, “How to Teach Controversial Content and Not Get Fired” (Dawson Salas, 2004), I thought it could provide Stephanie with guidance about how to approach complicated conversations and controversial content in her classroom. From either approaching administrators and parents in advance or allowing them to ask questions following student engagement, the article’s



<p>community who saw them as the inquisitive and capable futures of society they are.</p> <p>Inwardly, I toiled with a gamut of emotions regarding everything from curricular boundaries to my role as an educator, equity of attention to all of my student groups, my place with social justice, and feeling exposed in my teaching—my classroom events now in print for public scrutiny. Our curriculum was alive and had grown beyond my control.</p> <p>Who had seen the paper? What did my colleagues think? What did all of the families from my classroom think? How was this information about my teaching being interpreted? Did it give the impression that I was seeking recognition? That I had an agenda? That one student topic was more pertinent than another? Did it just make my class look awesome? And showcase the intellect and hard work of three boys in my room? (For which their families should receive more credit than their teacher)</p>	<p>premise is to prepare quality curriculum that is defensible because it meets school or district goals. Others, too, have taken on this issue. Notably Diana Hess' (2009) <i>Controversy in the Classroom: The Democratic Power of Discussion</i> is a powerful resource for teachers.</p> <p>Likewise, I have also suggested that teachers ought to find organizations that are bigger than themselves to lean on. In <i>Teaching in the Cracks Openings and Opportunities for Student-Centered, Action-Focused Curriculum</i> (Schultz, 2017), I highlighted how experienced teachers and former students have leveraged national organizations to help them with provocative curricular endeavors. Some of these organizations include: Facing History and Ourselves (<a href="http://facinghistory.org">facinghistory.org</a>), Mikva Challenge (<a href="http://mikvachallenge.org">mikvachallenge.org</a>), and Southern Poverty Law Center's Learning for Justice (<a href="http://tolerance.org">tolerance.org</a>).</p>
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The polyvocal vignettes provide a glimpse into our perspectives about Stephanie's changing pedagogy that allowed her third-grade students to engage in months-long, sustained projects ripe with issues related to justice and equity. These narratives also provide insights into how others reacted to the curricular changes. The analysis that follows is organized by the following themes that emerge from the vignettes and the overall experience: students' agency and providing classroom space for engagement, complications and aversions to framing curriculum as "social justice," and pedagogical agility amidst curricular rigidity.

### **Students' Agency and Providing Classroom Space for Engagement**

Stephanie's relationships with children and her confidence in the classroom provided a platform to envision an alternative approach to curriculum. In fact, Stephanie corrects some of the ways in which Natalie Wexler (2019) argued that elementary education has gone terribly wrong. In this alternative approach, Stephanie's students engaged in problem-solving and decision-making around topics they felt were important and worthwhile (Schubert, 1986). Brian came into the classroom as an admitted outsider but with teaching experiences engaging in emergent problem-oriented (Schultz, 2017, 2018) and culturally relevant curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 2009) in both the late elementary/middle school and university settings. Although new to her pedagogical repertoire, Stephanie supported and embraced a classroom culture where students

became willing participants to name issues important to them, think about alternative solutions to these problems, and subsequently engage in action to bring awareness to solve the matters at hand.

In providing this classroom space, Stephanie engaged in a transformation from previous practices as a teacher who led the classroom to one who worked alongside students and honored the capacities of young people under her charge. Importantly, this is not to infer that Stephanie did not previously see the deep potential of the students in her classroom, but rather that her previous pedagogical assumptions and her approaches to teaching were situated in a skill-based context. Stephanie had good classroom sensibilities but often felt confined to district-purchased curriculum that she would adjust to include learning games, tactile experiences, and inquiry-based tasks, instead of more worksheets. Though her improved lessons were more engaging to students and included rigor through their open-ended, inquiry-based nature, they were still somewhat canned lessons, removed from authentic experiences, designed to teach students skills for their future lives, rather than allowing students to learn through actual experiences in the present. Further, she thought, this was the way to provide accountability for students and teachers on state assessments.

But her pivot—where Stephanie maintains many of the practices she has come to know and do well with children while moving towards a more holistic, empowering, and emergent way of thinking about herself as teacher and the ways that students could make meaning of and generate content in the classroom—is quite powerful. This is seen particularly when thinking about how Stephanie transitions from a skill-driven to knowledge-rich and knowledge-producing classroom culture. It is in this classroom culture that the complicatedness to the aversions about the naming of this approach to teaching and learning as justice-oriented become more apparent.

Likewise, Stephanie is empathetic to the hesitations of her colleagues and principal about the work in which she is engaging. She even joins them in some of their curricular doubting. From her narratives, we see that Stephanie's principal sees the curriculum work as a professional and a parent. From his position, it is his duty to monitor student learning. He recognized that honoring student voice and choice in the classroom was a promising practice and so allowed Stephanie's class to proceed in constructing their own knowledge and curriculum. He too was navigating his position within the school, community, and his family while negotiating the position of justice-oriented emergent curriculum within public expectations and mandates. Stephanie's teacher colleagues face pressures because of common interpretations of accountability for student learning. This causes them, too, to naturally feel a responsibility to control curriculum. This is often exerted with skill-driven content that supposedly ensures students have been exposed to necessary skills that can demonstrate whatever is defined as mastery on state assessments.

To the principal's leadership and credit, he supported his teacher's vision and practice. He was often present in Stephanie's classroom and engaged with the students. Others from the district leadership also took note of the third graders and their teacher. The superintendent, communications director, and curriculum director all paid classroom visits to see the children in action, celebrating what they saw. This was exemplified when the students presented their work at the district's monthly Board of Education meeting.

### **Complications and Aversions to Framing Curriculum as “Social Justice”**

Within this different approach to enacting curriculum, space was provided that allowed students agency over and input into their learning. As a result, it also challenged the dominant classroom approaches that limit what children can do in schools and resisted concerns about how

students would perform on high-stakes testing. Brian sees Stephanie as a profound example of a social justice educator—one who is engaging in the promotion of student agency, creating spaces for student problem-posing (Freire, 1970/2000), and teaching towards freedom (Ayers, 2004). He is also keen to acknowledge the perspectives and the caution offered by Stephanie when naming this kind of curriculum and the theorizing that occurs alongside it. This has challenged Brian in how he presents ideas for curriculum theorizing with teachers and university students. Likewise, it has challenged Stephanie to think about how this pedagogical pivoting has both enhanced and complicated her identity as a teacher. Indeed, it has pushed her to contemplate how to address students naming issues that may be perceived by others as controversial or inappropriate for students to take on within the school setting.

While engaging in this type of teaching, Stephanie had a clear aversion to calling the teaching anything labeled “social justice.” As a person new to the community, Brian had not given a lot of thought to a different perspective on the subject than the one he had experienced in other places, and he had not seen this framing as a touchstone that would have been met with resistance. It was clear early on in their co-teaching endeavors, though, that Stephanie had issues with such a framing and resisted Brian’s references to her teaching as such. At first this troubled Brian, and it was difficult for him to see why there was such a resistance. Something that had been so commonplace and accepted in one environment or context was, in this new space, met with what felt like contempt. To Brian, Stephanie was embodying the types of teachers he had worked hard to induct and support during his years in teacher education. He needed to better understand how to support Stephanie in her pivoting to the more emergent approaches to curriculum that she was readily moving towards, while also letting it be labeled in a way that made Stephanie comfortable. Her pushback and explicitness about “just not calling it social justice” has had an impactful and powerful effect on Brian’s scaffolding, not only for Stephanie, but also for other pre-service teachers with whom he is currently working.

In order to better understand Stephanie and other teachers’ resistance, we considered perceptions of curriculum neutrality and objectivity, contemplations about naming forms of curriculum, and how teaching has become politicized. It should not be a big surprise that Stephanie has an aversion to calling what is happening in her classroom social justice teaching. Clearly her colleagues show resistance to the topics and doubt whether this approach will cover the necessary and tested content. Her newfound excitement is largely dismissed by her colleagues. They doubt the shift in curricular approaches has the ability to do what the colleagues believe they are supposed to do to “teach” students. And when her colleagues leave the copies of her materials after a meeting with her, Stephanie’s inclinations about their views are affirmed.

Likewise, Stephanie’s supportive principal asks powerful, yet rhetorical, questions about his own child related to the curriculum topics the third graders have chosen. Not only does he make an assumption that his son would not have interests in such social topics and is simply more interested in sports and video games, but the principal also wonders out loud to Stephanie “if he should.” It is in this interaction that the principal tells Stephanie she is lucky that he is allowing her to approach curriculum in this way with her students. It is also where he acts as a curricular gatekeeper who is permitting this sort of engagement to happen, a common stance of many school leaders. In these moments, the source of Stephanie’s reservations and apprehension is understood more easily.

This is further compounded by other interactions with colleagues who share doubts about “doing” school this way. Although not appearing in her points-of-entry, Stephanie relayed other teachers’ hesitancy about the developmental appropriateness of students as young as eight naming

topics of their concern. Are they ready to talk about such an issue? Will it harm them? Do they know enough? What if they get into those “gory” details Stephanie assures her administration she is going to avoid? Is there an appropriate time to only cover the surface topics and not dig deeper into their complicatedness? Perhaps having more questions than answers is demonstrative of the power of this form of curriculum work.

As much as there is resistance, it is in these spaces that Brian sees Stephanie as exemplifying what it means to teach in a justice-oriented space. She sees the inquisitive nature of the students and their questions as motivating and inspiring to them. She rallies behind their concerns. She supports what they find relevant. She is responsive to their ideas. She challenges dominant narratives. She opens spaces in her classroom for the students to explore, build, and do. No longer are her students merely consumers of others’ knowledge. No longer are her students solely focused on facts and skills. And Stephanie is willing to delve right in. This is particularly apparent with what many considered the provocative and controversial issues related to White Nationalism and discrimination that do not provide an easy road for a teacher in a small town.

It is also in this space that Brian recognizes the complicatedness of how teachers are viewed. Teaching is Stephanie’s livelihood and helps to provide for her family. Being in a politically contested area that is often divided on many issues, Stephanie knows how charged everything is, and teachers are not excused from such debates. So, whereas she is doing the work, Stephanie is understandably concerned about becoming a lightning rod simply because of the naming, which can carry notions of activism, brainwashing, partisanship, and a lack of neutrality.

Stephanie still struggles with “controlling” the curriculum. This is largely because of the accountability pressures when looking directly at mandates and state expectations, even though this approach can have students working towards the state’s standards. In the current educational climate, it takes time and practice to trust that students will grow and learn when honored as conscious curriculum makers. Mandates challenge the roll of a teacher as a facilitator and weaken confidence in students as knowledge-producers. Add to this a social-justice label and political opinions, and teachers become afraid to take risks. The nature of pedagogical pivoting suggests that Stephanie still feels the tug between emergent curriculum and the skill-based curriculum most teachers feel forced to do. She knows better and understands that there is no either/or dichotomy, but the cautiousness is there when test scores and district report cards are continuously emphasized. Since this initial endeavor into emergent curriculum making with students, Stephanie feels as though she is putting her teaching reputation on the line each year. It is a change, Stephanie argues, about shifting the demands of an accountability culture into the hands of her students from her. And each year her students’ curiosities drive their growth to deeper learning. So far, the community has not labeled her the “social-justice-activist teacher,” and her students have shown growth on state assessments despite the emergent curriculum.

### **Pedagogical Agility Amidst Curricular Rigidity**

In one of his narrative points of entry, Brian critiques situations in which a “lack of vetting and perhaps the inadequate content knowledge of teachers causes them to often find simple, easy to implement resources that are lacking.” He also cites research that exposes ongoing and troubling content in many textbooks. Whereas his concerns should give teachers pause, Stephanie also cautions that teachers run these same risks while building curriculum alongside their students. Although curriculum has been sanitized through big house publishing and an overreliance on

outside curriculum designers with supposed expertise purporting that the materials are standards-aligned and will improve student achievement, the reality is that curriculum making can be a daunting task for anyone involved. When teachers look to their students to name what is worthwhile and co-create curriculum alongside them, there is inherent risk in contributing to errors of fact, taking an “incorrect” or at least incomplete stance on particular issues, or not creating time and space to fully understand an issue or topic. Though this point applies to both rigid, skill-based as well as emergent, inquiry-based curriculum, it is particularly important when thinking about how young people often gravitate towards controversial, in-the-news topics of the day that they are curious about or are affecting them. That students will name such provocative issues often raises concerns about what is developmentally or age appropriate. Brian argues that if students have the inclination to name such issues, they are not only motivated for engaging in the inquiry, but they also ought to also be provided with the opportunities to explore such topics in the classroom.

Having the pedagogical agility to move from the skill-acquisition oriented approach to following the named interests of students does not exempt a teacher from having, investigating, and inquiring about the necessary content knowledge in order to work alongside their students. As Stephanie did, teachers should not only dig into literature about topics in which they are not an expert or do not have deep content knowledge, but they should also consult with outside community members who do have such insights. Even better, teachers should consider bringing those very experts into the classroom community. Although not in her narratives, examples of this occurred when Stephanie brought in the county auditor or other times when she welcomed a diversity scholar and an artist to support students’ inquiries. These efforts echo the call that John Dewey (1915) encouraged over 100 years ago in *School and Society* when he argued that the community needs to be involved in the school and the school in the community. No teacher is going to be the all-knowing expert about each topic their students name, nor should they be, yet there must be an expectation that, when creating spaces for students to deeply examine the issues, they gain such content knowledge.

Some of Stephanie’s narratives illustrate the complicatedness of labels, both in the naming of the topics and identifying the teaching practice as justice-oriented. Would Stephanie’s colleagues have balked if her students had only named discrimination or inequality instead of White Nationalism? In the three years that followed her first foray into emergent curriculum, students have named homelessness as one problem they wanted to solve, and colleagues have not hesitated to support such a cause. This begs the consideration of what is appropriate for students. If teachers stopped introducing lessons with, “Today we’re going to learn about main idea,” and instead with, “Today we’re going to learn about what is on your minds,” how does the classroom curriculum shift? How do teachers see their roles? How do they see their students? And how do students see themselves in such spaces?

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# Like a Rolling Stone

## Risks, Implications, and Trajectories of Educational Events

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WHAT MIGHT IT MEAN to be seized by an “event,” to have your symbolic notion of self and world shattered, and to ultimately put at risk a sense of your own prior significance as you work to reconstitute who you are and your relationship to your social world? Using Badiou’s (1998/2001) notions of “event” and subsequent “truth process” to explicate what we mean by the term “educational event,” we explore what might constitute an education beyond its socialization function, that is, an education that begins where and when inherited understanding breaks down. In this regard, we follow Felman and Laub (1992) who suggest that “teaching, as such, takes place precisely only through a crisis, if it does not ... it has perhaps *not truly taught*” (p. 53, emphasis in original).

While we acknowledge vital questions raised in this *Journal* about various influences on curriculum and schooling globally and the importance of tracing the multiple ways particular school systems include and exclude various populations, we propose here to explore two questions we believe at the heart of debates about the aims of schooling and purposes of education: What might be educational about education beyond its qualification and socialization functions? In what ways might we arrange knowledge for the possibility of an “event” to occur and a subsequent “truth process” to proceed?

Before we explicate a more detailed picture of what Badiou potentially offers to respond to these questions, we begin with some key distinctions made by the European scholar, Gert Biesta (2010), those between “qualification, socialization, and subjectification” educational rationales. In addition to the certification of capabilities to do something (e.g., plumbing, some basic knowledge of textbook versions of official political rule), qualification also refers to that deemed necessary to participate in collective life. Here, the notion of qualification overlaps with schooling’s socialization function by referencing “the many ways we become part of particular social, cultural, and political ‘orders’” (Biesta, 2010, p. 20). These orders include the “hidden curriculum”

regarding expected but implicit language codes, bodily schedules, and mental routines. They also include those more intentional aims such as “the continuation of particular cultural or religious traditions, or for the purpose of professional socialization” (Biesta, 2010, p. 20). Both qualification and socialization measure in part complicity in body, mind, and imagination within a historically distinct influential social order.

While he notes the role played by qualification and socialization for the vitality of cultures, Biesta’s (2010) concern lies with the potential of an educational aim, specifically what he calls subjectification. As he details, the question of what is educational about education is largely absent in mainstream Euro-American discussions about public education, and subjectification constitutes a compelling response to the question:

I take the position that subjectification should be an intrinsic element of all education worthy of the name. ... It is ... a normative statement expressing the belief that education becomes uneducational if it only focuses on socialization—i.e., on the insertion of “newcomers” into existing sociocultural and political orders—and has no interest in the ways in which newcomers can, in some way, gain independence from such orders as well. (Biesta, 2010, p. 210)

Subjectification, he argues, begins in the “excess” present in every teaching situation (Biesta & Safstrom, 2011). We might think of this excess in terms of both observable happenings when teachers and students study together and alternative potentials also present in such acts. We can observe what seems to be going on in a classroom interaction, what may be going on depending on who is asked, as well as what could already always be happening that constitutes the immeasurability of “excess” in a teaching situation.<sup>1</sup> Working within this excess, what makes an activity educational in a teaching-learning situation lays in people’s “particular interest in freedom”—a freedom (as we interpret) to subjectify, to not only *learn a subject* but *to become a subject* beyond or in excessive addition to that which we have been taught we are.

In many ways, Biesta’s work rearticulates key distinctions made by Canadian scholar Kieran Egan (1983). Egan (1983) distinguished between schooling’s dominant *socialization* function so as make the case that educators must embrace its potential *educational* aspect. How does he distinguish between the two?

Anything which may reasonably be called socializing has implicit in it the impulse and tendency to make people more alike, and the contrasting impulse and tendency in education is to make people more distinct. (Egan, 1983, p. 27)

We can note this difference most clearly in reference to schools:

Those activities which are engaged in so that people can get on more easily in society at large—can get jobs, can fulfill the basic responsibilities of citizenship, parenthood, and so on—will tend to be mainly matters of socialization. Those activities which lead to personal cultivation will tend to be mainly educational. Socializing activities are justified on the grounds of social utility; educational activities on the grounds of cultivation of individuals. (Egan, 1983, p. 31)

These are productively provocative distinctions in regard to schooling possibilities. We now turn to explicate a portion of Alain Badiou's work related to ways we might further respond to the question, what is educational about education beyond its socialization and qualification rationales?

### Educational Events & Truths

Badiou's (1998/2001) first philosophical assertion is that "truth" ought to be the primary category of philosophy and that ethics, in contrast to its concern with "abstract categories (Man or Human, Right or Law, the Other ...), should be referred back to particular situations" (p. 3). Badiou's (1998/2001) "ethic of truths" is premised on "the strong, simple idea that every existence can one day be seized by what happens to it and subsequently devote itself to that which is valid for all" (p. 66). In this formulation, "seized" is designated as an "event," such as *falling* in love, that shatters any pre-existing intelligibility of self, other, or any topic at all. Thus seized, a "becoming subject" is bequeathed the opportunity to reestablish new terms of understanding via a "truth process."

For Badiou, truths are not achievements arrived at through predetermined techniques of reasoning, properties of power (that is, power only controls opinion, not truths) or facts temporally imprisoned by any dialectic (Balibar, 2004). Truths, rather, consist of the material traces of thinking/of thought expressed through love, art, science, and politics that a "becoming subject" produces through a truth process (den Heyer, 2015). Badiou argues that it is to these situated truth processes instigated by an event that ethics and philosophy (and, we assert, the educational) must lend support.

Badiou (2005) makes several key moves to rehabilitate contemporary interpretations of "truths" aiding thought about educational events. First, he situates philosophy in a supporting role to ontology, derived from his interpretation of mathematical set theory. Mathematics is ontology for Badiou. Or, more accurately, mathematical set theory provides a precise mapping to think of ontology and our contemporary configuration as symbolically represented beings, making our way according to those identities and beliefs required by the "situation" in which we have been socialized (or have been set up) (den Heyer, 2015). Badiou's attention to ethics as "situation-al" constitutes his Foucauldian angle (in French, situation, State, and status quo are etymologically kin). That is, Badiou is quite clear that a subject, or, in his term, a "perseverance in being," only initially exists situationally as a legible-credible being as much as it is recognized and perseveres through the gaze of States' symbolic order through which a subject position is offered and/or assumed. We get bent to the shape we take.

Recognizing the situation as such, Badiou asks that we think about being and becoming in relation to the "without-one" that is the Lacanian "void" at the heart of all status quo situations: "The multiple 'without-one'—every multiple being in its turn nothing other than a multiple of multiples—is the law of being. The only stopping point is the void" (Badiou, 1998/2001, p. 25). The "void" lies at the heart of all "situations" and their supporting knowledge claims—that at any given and unpredictable moment one may encounter a person, a thought, a question, that causes an "event" utterly voiding the status quo derived legitimacy of what we just had thought or desired about ourselves or anything in particular (e.g., how falling in love shatters everything we thought about "our" situation as an any-"one" *mind our own business* before the "event" of "falling" in love—see *The Crying Game* or *Romeo & Juliet*) (den Heyer, 2009).<sup>2</sup>

Like love as an event, we are confronted with the question and task of “fidelity,” which is where, for Badiou (1998/2001), the question of ethics, and, we think, the educational, begins: “A crisis of fidelity is always what puts to the test, following the collapse of an image, the sole maxim of consistency (and thus ethics): Keep going! (p. 78–79):

There is always only one question in the ethic of truths: how will I, as some-one, *continue* to exceed my own being? How will I link the things I know, in a consistent fashion, via the effects of being seized by the not-known? (Badiou, 1998/2001, p. 50, emphasis in original)

In this process, a becoming subject embodies a “disinterested interest” in one’s situated subject position and concomitant opinions to, for example, mind your own business and attempts to articulate what exceeds identification, concern for status, or self-interest:

All my capacity for interest, which is my own perseverance in being, has poured out into the future consequences of the solution to this scientific problem, into the examination of the world in the light of love’s being-two, into what I will make of my encounter, one night, with the eternal Hamlet, or into the next stage of the political process, once the gathering in front of the factory has dispersed. (Badiou, 1998/2001, p. 50)

Set in motion by an event, a “becoming subject” is someone who is “simultaneously himself ... and in excess of himself” (Badiou, 1998/2001, p. 45).

In pursuit of that which is an interminable “excess of,” a “becoming-subject” seeks to name that which it will have been absurd not to have believed, “making seem possible precisely that which, from within the situation, is declared to be impossible ... an event-ality still suspended from its name” (Badiou, 1998/2001, pp. 121, 126). The proper verb tense, therefore, with Badiou’s event-truth procedure, and as we argue, with Biesta (2010) in mind, the educational, is neither the present, past, or future, but rather the future anterior.

By maintaining fidelity to articulating the implications of the event in a consistent fashion, a “becoming subject” declares “this will have been true,” pursuing exactly “what it will be absurd *not to have* believed” (Gibson, 2006, p. 88, emphasis added) (e.g., Pluto is a planet one day, the next day not; laws against miscegenation have sufficient support and, then, appear for most absurd). For Badiou (as cited in Bartlett, 2011), such truth processes conducted in the future anterior tense “are beginnings [that] will be measured by the re-beginnings they authorize” (p. 118). So, potentially, begins an education that is educational. With each truth process, there is the risk that an Evil, what Badiou terms “le Mal” might emerge. Here, we will briefly outline Badiou’s notion of both the Good of human becoming and the Evil to which such good gives rise before turning to story Jagger, Richard, and The Rolling Stones.

### Potential Evils

Badiou warns against the “Evil” (translated from his term in French, “le Mal”) made simultaneously possible only because of the human potential to engage in the “Good” of truth-processes.<sup>3</sup> For Badiou, the Good of human capacities for affirmative inventions precedes, indeed makes possible, the le Mal/Evil that, for Badiou, comes in three forms. Evils include *simulacrum*



(of an event and truth-process), which is to embrace a teleological fantasy of an existing situation's promised fulfillment, usually proclaimed as a people's "destiny"; *betrayal*, which is to either give up on a truth-process due to situational discouragement or to deny that an event ever occurred; and *terror/disaster*, when, interpreting truth as a noun rather than verb, one's Truth justifies the destruction of the material conditions that others need to enact their potential truth-processes.<sup>4</sup>

Recall the mythological figure of Procrustes who forced guests to fit his guest bed through the tortures of stretching or amputation (den Heyer & van Kessel, 2015). No one ever exactly fit, including Procrustes when he was captured and forced by Theseus to be "fitted" according to the dimensions of his own guest bed. Obviously, history is full of examples where Truth terrors become "disaster" (Badiou, 1998/2001). For Badiou, the relevant conclusion is not to deny the affirmative Good that is a truth-process, but the necessity for vigilance against the distortion of the Good that is Evil.

What examples exist beyond schools to shed further light on these distinctions? We turn now to argue that Keith Richards and Mick Jagger and The Rolling Stones have experienced a Badiou-ian event and continue to work as "becoming subjects" through its ensuing truth-process (Badiou, 1998/2001). We posit that their eventful encounter reveals the condition(s) through which eventful teaching might arise, namely, the condition of humility on the part of educators whose aims are to *educate* their students. We juxtapose our discussion of Richards's/Jagger's exploration of blues as truth-process with another story, this one of the author's failed teaching event to explore/explicate Badiouian philosophy as pedagogical strategy reaching beyond socialization towards a hoped-for educational experience for his students.

To begin, we argue that The Rolling Stones fulfill Badiou's (1997/2003) requirements of becoming subjects of truths, being, namely:

- 1) The music industry The Stones helped create "did not pre-exist the event" (Badiou, 1998/2001, p. 14) they declared;
- 2) Badiou writes "truth is entirely subjective ... every subsumption of its becoming under a law will be argued against" (p. 14)—in The Stones' case, their well-documented entanglements with law-enforcement and perception as counter-cultural might speak to this requirement; the industry they helped to create—mass pop music—existed outside the law at the most banal level. Cops at concerts and other public appearances of the new stars were ill prepared to adequately deal with this new audience and, more profoundly, the necessity for the band to invent a new process of staging rock shows on a scale not conceivable prior to advent of what popular magazines referred to as The British Invasion;
- 3) Once an event has been declared—being seized by Chicago Blues, for example—"fidelity to the declaration is crucial, for truth is a process and not an illumination" (p. 15). In Richards' case, his entire life has been a militant conviction to spreading the gospel of the blues, nothing more, nothing less (Richards, 2011);
- 4) Finally, "a truth is a concentrated and serious procedure, which must never enter into competition with established opinions" and is "indifferent to the state of the situation" (Badiou, 1998/2001, p. 15)—for Richards and The Stones, this indifference is perhaps essential to their initial and eventual burgeoning success both within the industry that grew up around them and as forces shattering and reshaping these realms in potential re-beginnings.



The Rolling Stones' storied career helps us contemplate the complexities of experiencing an event that leads to a compelling response to the question, what is educational about education?

### **The Rolling Stones as a Whole**

We approach the question of what may be learned from the lives of Keith Richards and The Stones about the educational, the event, and subjective materiality as “a whole.” In unequivocal terms, philosopher Gilles Deleuze (as cited in Buchanan, 1999) writes that, unless one takes the work of a philosopher *as a whole*, “you just won’t understand it at all” (p. 7). Specifically, it is by treating a philosopher, a filmmaker or musician *as a whole* that we begin to understand a syntax of style that emerges, that takes different directions, reaches impasses, and makes breakthroughs or that we begin to detect the “machine” that they create and the functions it operationalizes for thought and action (Buchanan, 1999).

While we examine in broad strokes this career whole, we also acknowledge the troublesome aspect of highlighting another white band, and British at that, to give body to the philosophical assemblage we seek to deploy. The mal-distributed, policed, and unequal access between artists of color and white artists to North American and European popular audiences through forms of music, film, and art are undeniable, as they remain to a disturbing degree today. But Richards and The Stones are not those white knock offs of American blues who made their fortune using the forms of segregated black musicians who were limited to the “colored radio” and “live chitlin’ circuit” and whose influence was ignored by most of white America. In fact, this racialized segregation begins to break down for a complex range of reasons, including the growing influence of Motown and The Stones themselves when they demanded that their favorite Chicago Blues musicians perform as opening acts for their live US and UK shows and television appearances (Neville, 2015). More than lip service or token recognition, we see Richards/Jagger as singularly committed to living and honoring both their blues masters and a form of blues music that had seized them in their youth and had “ruptured” their lives.<sup>5</sup>

In the documentary *Under the Influence*, blues guitar legend Buddy Guy recounts the first time he saw fellow Chicago Blues men Howlin’ Wolf and Muddy Waters on television. What Guy reveals is that it was at the insistence of Mick Jagger—who was set to appear on the show *Shindig* with the rest of The Stones—that the producers acquiesced and permitted Wolf and Waters to perform in front of the cameras. Guy recounts, “I even cried about that, man. And sure enough, that’s when they brought Howlin’ Wolf and Muddy. And that’s the first time I’d ever seen ‘em on television” (Neville, 2015). It is in the spirit of this kind of reverence and advocacy for the musicians whose music shattered them that we elect to move forward with using The Stones to exemplify the subjective materiality of an educational event.

### **A Rupture at the Heart of Being – Keith and Music**

We begin by tracing Keith Richards’ encounter with music, an encounter that opened up the possibility of an original life-long trajectory or, in Badiou’s terms, a “truth process.” A vital moment for Keith Richards is his exposure to instruments and music at home. As he listens to music on the radio through the influence of his mother’s love of different forms of music. Richards declares, “It was like a drug. In fact a far bigger drug than smack. I could kick smack; I couldn’t

kick music” (Richards, 2011, p. 57). Elsewhere, Richards recounts the first time he heard Elvis Presley’s “Heartbreak Hotel.” It is worth noting Richards’ reaction to hearing it, as the words he uses signal an “event”-ful encounter. Words such as explosion, stunner, overwhelmed, and trigger, in addition to his claim that he was a different person after hearing “Heartbreak Hotel,” suggest his encounter with the song instigated a becoming to articulate an excess of his being. He describes hearing the opening lines of the song, and particularly, “the sound” as being “the last trigger” that would compel him to investigate the “roots” of that music (p. 88). Keith said that the song was “a stunner” and that it “was almost as if I’d been waiting for it to happen” (p. 87). Richards states, “when I woke up the next day, I was a different guy,” and he describes feeling “overwhelmed” (p. 87).

Shortly thereafter, Keith Richards fell in love—with his first guitar. He “never parted” from it, and he “took it everywhere and [he] went to sleep with [his] arm laid across it” (p. 59). As Richards is learning his instrument, he eventually has a fateful encounter with Mick Jagger at a train station, and the two of them immediately bond over the Chuck Berry and Muddy Waters records Mick carries in his possession.

One of the things that Mick brought Keith was a proximity to the records Keith loved. And, “it was, always, about the records”—the sounds of Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf, Lightnin’ Hopkins, and Buddy Guy—these were the “seminal sounds,” the “tablets of stone” (p. 75) that moved Richards and Jagger toward an as-yet-unknown trajectory of a truth process, a search for what music can do.

Another sign that Jagger and Richards maintained fidelity to their eventful encounter with the Chicago Blues sound is in their appreciation for a certain flexibility of expression that some other listeners had no tolerance for. Elsewhere, Richards suggests what Badiou might term an emerging Evil or *simulacrum* of truth taking place: “people were not really listening to the music, they just wanted to be part of this wised-up enclave. ... None of these blues purists could play anything. But their Negroes had to be dressed in overalls and go ‘Yes’m, boss’” (p. 83). For Richards, these purists possessed “the One truth” of what blues music must be. Keith notes his disdain for these audience purists who would boo artists off the stage and exhibit hostility toward what their artistry might be in process of becoming when any performer they hear strayed and stretched their form.

Here we can hear echoes of Badiou—how a “wise enclave,” party, or authority is wont to apply their own truth onto others, a declaration of a one truth for all, even if this application results in epistemic violence by curtailing the potentiality of the new: every new beginning will be “measured by the re-beginnings they authorize” (Badiou as cited in Bartlett, 2011, p. 118). One response to the question regarding what is educational about education is that of an eventful encounter bequeathing opportunity for becoming subjects to our learning and lives. Richards and Jagger continued to search throughout their career for how they might create new expressions of the music that seized them so long ago.

### **Keith and Grandpa Gus – Educators as “Eventful Teachers”**

Badiou’s work, thus covered, allows us to ruminate on a notion of “eventful teacher/teaching” by asking a curricular question for educators: In what ways might we arrange knowledge for the possibility for an “event” to occur and a subsequent truth process to proceed? While he does not address education in any systemic manner, Badiou (2005) proposes that

“‘education’ ... has never meant anything but this: to arrange the forms of knowledge in such a way that some truth may come to pierce a hole in them” (p. 9). For Keith Richards, a third party mediated the eventful encounter. It is perhaps Keith’s grandfather Gus—who arranged Keith’s encounter with the guitar—who offers us the closest analogy for what we mean by eventful teaching and the condition of humility that might be pre-requisite for such an educational potentiality, one that stretches beyond socialization into a realm of the educational. As we will develop below, Gus proceeded by humbly arranging his own knowledge of the instrument to increase the likelihood that Keith would reach for it.

In his autobiography, Keith relays this story of how his grandfather “taught” him to play guitar. In his home, Gus always had the guitar in view. He kept it, however, hanging above a piano. Keith could not reach it. Arranged in this fashion, the instrument caught Keith’s eye. Richards (2011) writes, “And I just kept looking at it, and he didn’t say anything, and a few years later I was still looking at it” (p. 48). Reflecting on this pivotal and transformative moment of his life (Richards has also written a children’s book called *Gus & Me*—a story of getting his first guitar), Richards (2011) again writes that “Gus was leading me subtly into getting interested in playing, rather than shoving something into my hand and saying ‘It goes like this’” (p. 48).

Here, I (Robert) wish to offer one of my own stories of teaching and, in particular, a story that reveals how I ended up imposing “...like this” onto my students, despite my intentions of provoking an eventful encounter for them. I am a high school English Language Arts teacher and a doctoral student at a local university. One doctoral course was event-ful for me. Engaging with the readings and class discussions lead me to understand how my teaching, up to that point, focused more on standardized test-preparation—what Biesta would deem qualification and socialization. I understood, after taking this class, that there was a third function of education, namely, to educate. In class one day, the professor mentioned the novel *Ishmael* by Daniel Quinn (1992) and, having read it once before, I decided this novel would be fruitful for my own students to read as their novel study in grade 12. Years earlier in my first reading, *Ishmael* had shifted something within me and lead me to understand that many of the “Truths” I never questioned were, in fact, stories, myths, or cosmologies that had embedded themselves in a version of our human collected memory so deeply that I, like many, had forgotten they were stories (Kearney, 2002). I thought that, since this novel had ruptured my framework of understandings, it would do the same for my students—that it was a text I could use to arrange an encounter with an event, leading students toward truth-processes of their own.

That semester, I offered the novel to my students and lay in wait for the rupture to begin. Suffice it to say that the only shattering was that of my hopes to have bestowed upon my students an eventful education. They hated the book; most students did not read it, did not discuss it, and did not write about it. When asked what they would change about the course in my end of term survey, they responded, near-unanimously, “*Ishmael*—never again!” I puzzled at this reaction and thought that perhaps it was this batch of students (all 120 of them) that was the issue—not me or the novel. After all, *I* was trying to educate *them*!

The next semester I tried the same, only to receive a similar result. I chalked it up to my pedagogical strategies or the length of the novel or the complexity of the text itself. However, in researching and writing this paper, I have come to another realization—I needed to be more like Keith Richards’ grandfather Gus. In his aim to encourage Keith to fall in love with music and the guitar, Gus’ approach was not to thrust the songs and instrument into Keith’s hands and demand that he learn; instead, Gus hung the guitar on the wall whenever Keith was around. The presence of the guitar in the room on its own seduced an interest by Keith. Keith was drawn to the guitar.

In my own case of teaching *Ishmael*, not only did I thrust the book into their hands, but the implications of their not reading it led to failing assignments, a lower overall course mark, and being less competitive for post-secondary acceptance. More significantly, the education and event I had demanded did not occur, at least not in the way I had envisioned. It is instead, I, co-writing this paper, who received an education. I realized that, much like Charlemagne who imposed Christianity onto his subjects upon pain of death, I too was guilty of such an act of disaster—the Evil act of imposing my truth as a “One truth-path” for all or, alternatively, the cause of my event as being necessary for all. The death in my case was not a physical manifestation, rather, the death of possibility for an “event-ful” education to be encountered. I had proceeded arrogantly and unwittingly stultified such possibilities from arising. Ironically, my doctoral work is in contemplating humility and my teaching practice—which in this case was devoid of it. Humility is what we see as Keith’s grandfather Gus having possessed—a certain kind of restraint, an understanding of a certain impossibility of teaching at the heart of its doing (Felman, 1982, p. 22).

Such restraint or humility is not always easy to enact, “it is as possible, of course, to plan an event as it is to schedule when one falls in love—a fact at the heart of education as a most impossible profession” (den Heyer & Conrad, 2011, p. 13). Perhaps it is this humility that might provide the possibility for teachers to arrange the forms of knowledge such that students might encounter an event and ensuing truth process. In such an arrangement—what we might think of as “Gus-ful” teaching—typically the elder or teacher uses that position to invite or beckon youth to link what they know to that which they “do not in a consistent fashion” (Badiou, 1998/2001, p. 50) rather than demand from them what we teachers may not be able to provide: a subjectively implicating relationship to the possibility of learning about one’s own possibility of new possibilities.

I have begun to see my teaching more humbly as an arrangement of required knowledge, while also being attentive to the possibility of my students encountering an educational event without imposing my own truth-process or timelines onto them. Here, we wish to unpack, briefly, how we might consider teaching in a way that may invite students to encounter an educational event. By “educational” event we mean to signify a Badiou-ian event within the situational context of formal teaching and learning.

### **Can Curriculum Truly Invite? Aoki’s Invitation & Badiou’s Event**

We use the word *invite* to suggest that an encounter with the educational event cannot be thrust upon students. I (Robert) know this because on many occasions I have attempted to coerce my students into a “new” educational dimension of education (in contrast to qualification and socialization aims of such) and, worse, provided them the template through which their resultant personal transformation was to occur. My intentions were not borne of nefarious aims; I have experienced an educational event, and in the hopes of providing my students that same (in my view) *good* education, I stripped them of their agency, and they, in many ways, revolted. Unwittingly I thought I could thrust an object, like a guitar, into their hands to instigate an educationally eventful encounter. We return to this story regarding teaching *Ishmael* to help us think through the distinction between demand and invitation.

In reflecting on my pedagogical approach and urge to thrust the novel *Ishmael* into my students’ hands and minds, I realize that perhaps the object of Keith’s eventful encounter was foremost music, and Chicago Blues in particular. What Gus offered him through the guitar was a

vehicle through which he might be able to express his truth process. In my teaching of the novel, I tried to dictate the object of my students' eventful encounters in the hopes that their emergent truths would map directly onto the experience I had with *Ishmael*. What I have learned is that the object of an educational event is education itself, and the texts that I deploy, alongside our classroom conversations, act, at best, as vehicles through which my students may come to express or embark on a truth process. In this sense, we cannot dictate or demand the specifics of what an educational event will concern itself with, nor may we select a universal specific object as a catalyst for an eventful encounter. Instead, like Gus, we can offer an array of texts through which our students might be seized, along with an invitation to follow through on the aftermath of their event. Here, we wish to further explore the invitation as a context for encountering educational events.

Ted Aoki (1991) writes that, “for [curriculum] to come alive in the classroom, the curriculum itself has to contain, said or unsaid, an invitation to teachers and students to enter into it” (p. 19). Biesta's (2010) qualification, socialization, and educational subjectification functions of schools echoes what Aoki's (1991) offers about three “views” of what schools can be.

First, schools can focus on “rational thinking” where students are perceived as “containers” to be “filled” with “intellectual skills” (Aoki, 1991, p. 19). Aoki's second view is a “utilitarian” school given primarily to “doing,” emphasizing “practical skills” (p. 19). In this view, “the school is a preparations place for the marketplace and students are molded into marketable products” (p. 19). The third and final view is most closely aligned with educational subjectification, or, from Badiou, a “becoming subject” to a learning and life: the “school [is] given primarily to being and becoming, a school that emphasizes and nurtures the becoming of human beings” (Aoki, 1991, p. 19).

Whereas the first two views of school are encountered through “implementation” of curriculum, the latter view is one whose encounter must be reciprocally invited and accepted (Aoki, 1991, pp. 19–20). In our view, Aoki (1991) is suggesting that rigidly implementing a “curriculum-as-planned” not only sees teaching as a series of executable scripted commands, but diminishes the potential for something unknown to emerge; attention to the “curriculum-as-lived” (p. 7) is thwarted.

Aoki (1991) further reinforces this idea of being attuned to the possibilities of the curriculum-as-lived when he offers “curriculum improvisation” as an alternative to curriculum implementation (p. 20). This improvisation of curriculum is premised on participants who willingly accept the invitations to encounter educational “possibilities yet to be” (p. 21). Aoki's notion of curriculum improvisation calls to mind the unexpected and undetermined qualities of Badiou's event. Bartlett (2006) suggests “this education can have no predication *in* those forms of knowledge” (p. 54). That teaching can be considered potentially “event-ful,” from which emerges the possibility of an undetermined re-cognition, is precisely what we mean when we use the term *educational event* and attempt to describe the conditions through which such an event may be encountered.

### **Final Thoughts – On the Road? Keep Going!**

The Rolling Stones continue to write and perform music as a continuation of their truth process. They were seized by the music of the Chicago Blues and subsequently invented a worldwide influencing industry that did not precede them. In what we read via Badiou as their



“truth process,” they continue to honor the legacy of that eventful music and musicians. Their most recent album, *Blue & Lonesome*, features covers of mostly Chicago Blues songs. While some may suggest The Rolling Stones “sold out” long ago, this recent record suggests a band working to promote the art and artists that seized them. It is worth noting that none of the songs on the album are attributed to Jagger and Richards; any songwriting royalties would go to the Chicago Blues artists whose songs were recorded therein—The Stones are putting their money where their logo is.

Despite how you might feel about their music, The Rolling Stones *as a whole* have offered us a way of thinking educationally about education. We also take a moment, in closing, to note that our educational journeys might always be fraught with missteps and feelings of having compromised one’s fidelity to our always situated and singular truth processes, as was the case in my (Robert) teaching of *Ishmael*.

Despite this lack of satisfaction, Badiou’s words to en-courage event-ful becomings—“Keep Going!”—compel us to freshly rearticulate what this eventful failure “will have meant?” These words resonate when we realize that practices of teaching often stand in stark contrast to the reasons we became teachers in the first place—we find ourselves, at the end of a semester, shattered and asking, what have we done? Our academic preparation also leaves us wanting:

As with anything that constitutes an event, worlds are turned upside down, neuroses engendered, terrible beauties are born and education departments are forced to confront something that they are professionally required to find incomprehensible, namely, the desire to be educated, as something over and above the development of a specialist-knowledge, vocational competence, or the vague promotion of currently venerated “values.” (Cooke, 2013, p. 3)

In these moments of compromise or of wonderment, we might remember Keith Richard’s grandfather, and in the spirit of such Gus-ful humility and pedagogy, remain open to the educational possibilities that may arise as we Keep Going!

### Notes

1. We provide an example of such excess further below in the teaching story about *Ishmael*.
2. For Badiou, events-truth processes occur within four conditions or fields of human endeavor, love, science, art, and politics. We see education as encompassing each.
3. It is important to note that Badiou’s French translated into “Evil” is “le Mal,” which also connotes sickness in addition to something *very bad* and, thus, invokes shades of Lacanian and Foucauldian analyses into human situations. Evil, however, is a tactically useful translation in that it secularizes the term as a question of ethics and human situations.
4. For a wonderful explication of Badiou’s notion of evil placed alongside that of Lyotard, Said, and Derrida, see Jenkins, 2004.
5. Please note we do not suggest that these artists and band were the only ones to either be seized by the blues or to honour through subsequent work those masters. Many other examples across musical genres exist.

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# Seeking a Way

## A White Teacher's Journey from Critical Race Theory to Black Power Pedagogy

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THE NARRATIVE BELOW THAT OPENS this article describes the first unit that I taught in my second year as a full-time classroom teacher at Jane Smith Elementary on the west side of Chicago. This narrative is my own recollection aided by notes and assignments collected at the time, though I am confining the discussion to my preparation for the instruction and my reflection upon completion of the instruction. As such, it is the kind of narrative re-tell that is used most often in works of narrative inquiry and in Pinar's (1975) understanding of teaching autobiography and *currere*, which I will describe in more detail in the Methodology section.

The purpose of the analysis in this article is to describe the ontology of race, specifically Blackness, as it is theorized in Critical Race Theory and how that ontology problematizes the way I thought about issues of race and racism in my first week of teaching and, more generally, the way such things are being addressed in current liberal and neoliberal classrooms. This problematic underestimates the impact of racism within our societal structure, leaving many teachers and students, myself included, the victims of an unrealistic and destructive conception of how racial justice and equality can be achieved. I suggest that one potential way forward that addresses this unrealistic expectation can be found in the pedagogy put forward in the literature of the Black Power Movement.

### **Restorying the Past: The Problematics of My Liberal Disposition**

*I considered myself well-prepared by the undergraduate education courses I had taken, the life experiences I had gained in the intervening years, and the alternate certification program that I had successfully completed. Since this was my second year at Jane Smith Elementary School on the west side of Chicago, I knew many of the students and had developed a reputation among them as (I thought) tough but fair. In addition, I had worked to steep myself in critical pedagogy before and during my tenure, soliciting book suggestions from friends in the school and in other areas of academia. My whiteness in a majority Black<sup>1</sup> school did not garner much thought in my*

*preparation, though I had been told by colleagues and professors that my maleness and height would likely be an advantage due to the relative rarity of both in the teaching population the students had encountered.*

*The first unit in the curriculum purchased and supplied to us by the administration centered around the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) as published by the United Nations in 1948. This is an important historical document, and as I read through it during my preparation, I was excited to use it and its supporting documents as a source for teaching my students both how to read and analyze highly complex language and as a jumping off point for teaching elements of a social justice curriculum. The objectives supplied in the curriculum aligned with the Common Core, focusing on the complex skills that students would need as they continued in their educational journeys.*

*The unit took up the first four weeks of the term, and as those four weeks drew to a close, I reassessed what I had taught and what I thought my students had learned. The lessons went smoothly, and as I taught the material, I remember thinking about how well the short story about a child in Tibet who was struggling to complete school was connecting with my students' lived experience and how engaged they were in attempting to illustrate graphically complex ideas like freedom of speech. I was pleased that, despite the curriculum's "teacher-proof" aspects, I was able to add in a few pieces of content that I thought were particularly relevant to the students' lives in Chicago. Specifically, I included an article from the UDHR that was omitted in the provided curriculum about unwarranted detaining of protesters and had the students connect it to the ongoing "Black Lives Matter" protests.*

*As a young teacher, it was my earnest belief that if I only connected with the students and inspired them to work hard I would be able to help them overcome a system designed to keep them ensnared. This feeling, when combined with the relative success of the lessons and my knowledge of my students (whom I knew to be as capable as any group of students I had worked with), gave me confidence that they would pass all of their tests, allow their middle school teachers to assign activities with more high-level thinking, be accepted to the most prestigious high schools in Chicago, graduate with honors, go to college, complete college, and lead successful, happy, and prosperous lives.*

## **Methodology**

This article is the explanation and manifestation of a proposed method for teacher reflection. This form of reflection finds its foundation in the teacher practical knowledge movement and more specifically the work of William Pinar (2004) on educational autobiography and the concepts and methodology of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995, 1996). The method that I will explain and employ here includes four steps. Though the concept of a "step" necessarily implies a distinction between each (with a fifth step not included here), I prefer to think of these steps as continuous and flowing into and out of each other and not necessarily occurring sequentially. The first step, akin to Pinar's (1975) regression, is a retelling of a past teaching experience in which the teacher (in this case me) works to recreate a period of pedagogic work. The second is a period of reading and research in which that teacher troubles their perspective as a means of active listening and learning. The third step, akin to Pinar's (1975) progressive phase, is the creation of a future possibility where the teacher can reteach the material differently as inspired by their troubled and broadened perspective. I propose an additive fourth step that has

distinct implications for a progressive future possibility and that is informed by the ontological and epistemic conclusions drawn by racial realism, which posits that racism is inherent in our current system and, as such, cannot be removed completely from any teaching practice. Thus, the fourth step is the process of problematizing that future narrative in an effort to see those places where even this improved lesson still reinforces oppressions. The final step is the application of that revised future possibility to actual teacher practice with the understanding that this practice will be necessarily flawed and in need of further revision. In short, the method that I advocate here begins with a given teacher (myself in this case) (1) reflecting upon previous experience, (2) problematizing their own work in the classroom by expanding their perspective through listening and learning, (3) envisioning their lesson as presented in the future to include those new perspectives, (4) while assuming that their revised and refined lesson will necessarily also include elements that reinforce oppression (racism specifically here), in order to look for those elements in the prospective narrative and to address them as much as possible in actual practice, and (5) applying that future narrative to one's actual teacher practice. The result of this process is a lesson that has been changed to address new perspectives and the inevitable presence of oppression in any teaching activity *and* a teacher who has acknowledged the premises of racial realism, thus, freeing them to “*to imagine and implement racial strategies that can bring fulfillment and even triumph*” (Bell, 1992a, p. 374, emphasis in original).

### *Currere*

In his book *What is Curriculum Theory?* William Pinar (2004) describes “our pedagogical work [as] simultaneously autobiographical and political” (p. 4). This article began with a short autobiographical narrative describing my first four weeks of teaching in my second year at Jane Smith Elementary. Both the political and autobiographical nature of pedagogy as described by Pinar are salient here, but it is the autobiographic point that is crucial to my methodology. Pinar’s method of *currere* “provides a strategy for students of curriculum to study the relations between academic knowledge and life history in the interest of self-understanding and social reconstruction” (p. 35). His theory resonates with the work of John Dewey (1960) when he explained that

imaginative recovery of the bygone is indispensable to successful invasion of the future, but its status is that of an instrument ... the movement of the agent-patient to meet the future is partial and passionate; yet detached and impartial study of the past is the only alternative to luck in assuring success to passion. (p. 28)

*Currere* is formed primarily from both a look backward at past classroom experience, called the “regressive” phase, and a look forward toward a possible future, called the “progressive” phase (Pinar, 2004). The regressive phase of *currere* requires us “to slow down, to remember even re-enter the past” (p. 4). The progressive phase advises us “to meditatively imagine the future” (p. 4). These phases are put into practice here in two narratives denoted in italics, the first of which opened this article and embodied the regressive phase of *currere*. The second narrative will be the conclusion of the progressive phase.

The purpose of this methodology as Pinar describes it is not only to reflect on one’s own past experience, since a reflection is simply a review of a past with no deeper discussion or scrutiny. Philosopher of science Karen Barad (2003) makes a similar critique of reflection when



she states, “social constructivist approaches get caught up in the geometrical optics of reflection where, much like the infinite play of images between two facing mirrors, the epistemological gets bounced back and forth, but nothing more is seen” (pp. 802–3). Pinar’s (1975) regression requires more than simply (re)presenting the past to oneself. “One returns to the past, to capture it as it was, *and* as it hovers over the present” (p. 6, emphasis added). The present must be influential in this work and, more specifically, the present understandings that cast different light and shadow on the past.

Once one has (re)presented the past, it is the work of that same person to imagine a future in which that past has been (re)created in light of new knowledge and experiences. This progressive phase specifically

acknowledge[s] difference and discontinuity over sameness and identity. Such writing occupies the “seam” of the conscious/unconscious where boundaries between internal and external intersect (Benstock, 1988). Benstock’s point seems right to me, but there are racial and gender differences that can be usefully acknowledged. For heterosexually identified white men, finding the seams, discovering the traces of rejected fragments, and creating interior spaces may well prove pedagogically useful, potentially self-shattering. (Pinar, 2004, p. 51)

This point is crucial to a more complex and thorough process of the progressive phase. The point is not only to identify those seams through the lens of continued experience; it is also to employ additional outside learning and knowledge in that process. “The first things that come to mind are merely that, the first things. One must wait for the second, third, and fourth, until one has found clues pointing to what the first things hide” (Pinar, 2004, p. 53). I claim that those second, third, and fourth things that will come to mind can only do so in light of a different perspective on education, history, or society. Without attempting to step outside of one’s own perspective to trouble one’s own assumptions, the second, third, and fourth things become mere echoes. Those new and different perspectives open up past experience in ways that were not only not thought of at the time of the experience, but were also not possible at that time.

To this point, I have discussed Pinar’s method of *currere* and specifically the regressive and progressive phases of that method. In order to more fully explain the process of restorying past experience and storying future possibilities, it is important to turn to narrative inquiry. The next section will discuss the methodology of narrative inquiry and its place in the framework of the method employed here.

### **Narrative Inquiry: Storying and Re-storying**

The method of *currere* lends itself to the use of Narrative Inquiry, which I employ at both the beginning and end of this work. Narrative inquiry is a form of arts-based research characterized by the use of narrative, or “telling a story” (Kim, 2016, p. 6), in the formulation of knowledge, a conception with strong historical roots (Kim, 2016). Narrative Inquiry was developed in the 1980s and 1990s as part of the “Teacher Knowledge Movement” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996; Rosiek & Atkinson, 2005; Shulman, 1986), which sought to validate the experiential classroom knowledge of teachers. Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle (1993, 1999) describe the need for the cultivation of new teacher knowledge through the development of teachers’ desire to engage

in inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). “Such a stance would permit teachers to refine and extend existing insights based on their own experiences, reflections, and participation within a community of inquiry” (Chang & Rosiek, 2003). The use of narrative and particularly fictional narrative as I employ at the conclusion of this article, constitute a departure from the positivist aims of research, that is the search for truth, and instead offer to re-story my past experience as informed by my continuing intellectual development following the methodology of *currere*. Chang and Rosiek (2003) explain that

this shift from describing actual meanings to describing possible meanings is justified. Its aim is to produce a kind of scholarly speculation that remains accessible and germane to teachers’ personal practical experience. To put it in the terms used by Clandinin and Connelly (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995; Connelly & Clandinin, 1999), this research seeks to offer new public, private, and sacred stories about teaching practice that we hope can support and sustain more culturally responsive forms of [social] science teaching practice. (p. 254)

One of the significant issues with conducting this work is most clearly described in the work of critical whiteness studies (CWS). A personal narrative is just that, and because of one’s positionality, that narrative has certain clear limits suggested by CWS. CWS had two waves (Jupp et al., 2016), the first of which brought to light the need to acknowledge and name whiteness as an identity and more specifically a race-evasive identity. While this was hailed as a step forward in that, without identification, there is no way to discuss, let alone critique, the identity of whiteness, it did engender a second wave. This wave argued that (1) the first wave had become establishment rather than insurgent, (2) it described whiteness as a monolith losing the nuances inherent in the category, (3) nuance is key to discussions of race, and (4) simplistic identity must be rejected in favor of those more nuanced understandings (Jupp et al., 2016, see also Lensmire, 2010, 2017; Lensmire et al., 2013; Tanner, 2016). In addition, Tanner (2016) described second wave CWS as

attempting to theorize the ongoing production of whiteness in ... teaching and research with more care than a white privilege framework has allowed. [The] scholarship has considered: [1] what whiteness means for white people; [2] ways that whiteness continues to matter; and [3] how white supremacy informs institutional and social practices. (p. 423)

The framework has similarities to CRT including the validation of personal experience and the use of narrative as method.

Another set of works that speaks to whiteness as an identity in relationship to research can be found in the scholarship of critical race theory and feminist standpoint theory. In the article, “What is Critical Whiteness Doing in OUR Nice Field Like Critical Race Theory: Applying CRT and CWS to Understand the White Imaginations of White Teacher Candidates,” Matias et al. (2014) discussed these two frameworks with a focus on the idea of “the imagination.” Briefly, the imagination as it is used here is the internal ability of individuals to construct experiences based on present circumstance that are and potential future experiences that they might encounter if circumstances were changed. Matias et al. argued that the Black imagination is constructed through oppression to identify and understand both blackness and whiteness in the world as accurately as possible if for no other reason than survival. The white imagination is constructed to obscure both blackness and whiteness in one’s experience, thus, reinforcing a kind of color-blind racism. This

phenomenon is apparent in much of the research on white people and race (Castagno, 2008; Crenshaw, 2019; Mazzei, 2008; Singleton & Linton, 2006; Tanner, 2018) Sarah Ahmed (2004) also discussed CWS in her work called “Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism.” She proposed that

anti-racism is not performative. ... An utterance is performative when it does what it says. ... I will suggest that declaring whiteness, or even “admitting” to one’s own racism, when the declaration is assumed to be “evidence” of an anti-racist commitment, does not do what it says. In other words, putting whiteness into speech, as an object to be spoken about, however critically, is not an anti-racist action, and nor does it necessarily commit a state, institution or person to a form of action that we could describe as anti-racist. (p. 2)

Here we see two significant issues with the use of white experience in anti-racist work. First, experiences had by white people are unreliable because of their already-constructed imagination that is working to obscure moments of antiBlack racism. Second, the admission or confession of those experiences is not in itself anti-racist.

What, then, should be the path forward for white teachers in general and for this work specifically? The vast majority of teachers in this country are identified/self-identify as white, meaning that they (I) all must grapple with a white imagination that is obscuring their (my) experiences. While one answer might be that white people should no longer be teachers, especially of Black and Brown students (Milner, 2006; Seale, 1991; Ture & Hamilton, 1992), that is unrealistic. I propose that what must happen is that white teachers must learn to listen without speaking (Merculieff & Roderick, 2013) to the voices and experiences of Black and Brown people and only to respond through their actions in the classroom *without* declaring authority as a remedy to their inherent imagination. We must learn to question every level of our own understanding of our own experiences and accept that the story about race we have been telling ourselves is wrong.

In the next section, I will describe the works of Black and Brown scholars that I have read in an effort to change my imagination starting with racial realism as it is conceived of by one of the founders of CRT, Derrick Bell. In the third section, I will describe the pedagogy displayed in three foundational texts of the Black Power Movement. This theoretical work, while not necessarily intended for my use as a white teacher, offers insight into how racial realism and its ontological consequences can be included in our classrooms to more effectively and affirmatively combat racism and will inform the problematization of my classroom experience.

### **Problematizing Through Listening and Learning**

Critical Race Theory is often described as having several major tenets that help to define it as a theoretical framework. While not all theorists agree on the details, there are five tenets that are commonly mentioned. These are (1) the permanence of racism (Bell, 1992a, 1992b; Leonardo, 2013; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002); (2) counter-storytelling (Delgado, 2015); (3) whiteness as property (Harris, 1993); (4) interest convergence (Bell, 1976; Leonardo, 2013); and (5) a critique of liberalism (Delgado, 2015; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). For the purposes of this article and my re-storied narrative, I am most interested in the first: the permanence of racism or, as Bell (1987, 1992a, 1992b) names it, racial realism.

## Derrick Bell's Racial Realism

Bell's work in legal realism and critical legal studies formed much of the foundation for racial realism and, by extension, CRT. The legal realists pushed back on the classical structure of law by arguing that any given legal decision could be argued either way based on which legal precedent, or even which aspect of a single given legal precedent, was being employed (Bell, 1992a; Singer, 1988), undermining the assumption of legal objectivity that undergirds much of legal scholarship (Kramer, 2006). Bell took legal realism and applied it to the field of race and racism, arguing that the idealism of future equality was akin to the idealism of legal objectivity, both are mirages of water on the road ahead, where no matter how fast a car goes, it will never reach the puddle. In "Racial Realism," Bell (1992a) argued

*Black people will never gain full equality in this country. Even those herculean efforts we hail as successful will produce no more than temporary "peaks of progress," short-lived victories that slide into irrelevance as racial patterns adapt in ways that maintain white dominance. This is a hard-to-accept fact that all history verifies. We must acknowledge it and move on to adopt policies based on what I call: "Racial Realism." This mind-set or philosophy requires us to acknowledge the permanence of our subordinate status. That acknowledgement enables us to avoid despair, and frees us to imagine and implement racial strategies that can bring fulfillment and even triumph.* (p. 374, emphasis in original)

Zeus Leonardo (2013) explained Bell's "Afro-Pessimism" as defiance in the face of impossibility (p. 18). Racial realism, he explained, is the attempt to understand "actual race relations" in spite of ideologies of "utopian thinking" (p. 18).

The conception of antiBlack racism as permanent within the American system is further explicated in Bell's narrative chronicles including most famously the final chapter of *Faces at the Bottom of the Well* ("The Space Traders") (1992b) and in "The Chronicle of the Slave Scrolls" and "The Chronicle of the Black Crime Cure" in *And We Are Not Saved* (1987). "The Space Traders" describes an alien encounter wherein the aliens offer to the government of the United States the technology to solve their economic crises including income inequality and the technology to clean and restore the world's environment from centuries of misuse. All they ask in exchange is for America to hand over all Americans of significant African heritage. In the end, the government decides to send the Black population away with no assurances of their safety in exchange for the technologies. "The Chronicle of the Slave Scrolls" depicts the narrator coming across a scroll in a bottle that contains the whole lost history of slavery from the point of view of the slave. This scroll fills in the holes in the Black identity and allows Blacks to progress and develop on par with and eventually to outpace the progress of white Americans. The white population, threatened by the upward progress of the Black population, forces them to burn the scrolls, reestablishing the endangered racial hierarchy. Finally, in "The Chronicle of the Black Crime Cure," a gang finds stones in a cave that make the Black person who eats them unwilling to commit any crime and instead to put their efforts toward moral and economic uplift. This cure meant that those Black people who had committed crimes (a percentage statistically equivalent to the percentage of criminals among whites) were the only people significantly affected by the cure. The stones only worked on Black people and resulted in one of the proclaimed reasons for racism, Black criminality, to be eliminated and no longer part of white supremacist discourse. The result of this

change was not that those who had previously barred Black people from advantage because of their supposed criminality suddenly threw their doors open and welcomed their Black neighbors. Instead, the oppressive actions of the white majority remained the same; only the reasoning behind those actions changed. Instead of the proclaimed excuse for racial hierarchies being supposed Black criminality, those in power quickly switched to arguing for the intellectual superiority of white people.

Each of these three narratives illustrates a different aspect of racial realism. “The Space Traders” demonstrates that, while we claim to have made progress in our current iteration of liberal democracy, given the opportunity, it is easy to believe that the white majority would accept the trade offered. When push comes to shove, our progress is a mirage. In “The Slave Scrolls,” Bell demonstrates how any time there is a movement to heal the psychic damage done by the loss of history and identity to slavery, which tends to lead to a collective uplift of Black people, the white majority actively opposes that healing, erasing again that which was originally erased through slavery. “The Black Crime Cure” is the most pointed of the chronicles, showing that the excuses given for the condition of Black Americans are not the true foundation of the barriers built around them. Instead, they are a palatable veil draped over actions that would have been taken regardless of how appetizing they appeared.

Racial realism, as formulated by Bell, is suggestive of several ontological consequences, though here I will be focusing on only two. The first is an ontology of racism whereby racism, no matter its source (whether through the process of human interaction, social orchestration, or an agent of its own reproduction) is ontologically *real* (Haney-López, 1996) and permanent within this system. Though most discussions of race and the state are concerned with how race is created/perpetuated by that state (Du Bois, 1935; Ture & Hamilton, 1992; Woodson, 2006), Glenn Bracey (2015) argued that racial hierarchies are built into the structure of the state and that a Critical Race Theory of the State claims in its simplest form that (1) “Every aspect of the state is racialized, meaning it shapes and is shaped by racism,” and (2) “The state is white institutional space and, thus, inherently white racist. The state cannot be considered racially neutral” (p. 563).

The ontological claim that anti-Black racism is permanent presents a problem for educators in that, if they cannot end racism, what are they to do in their lessons, since actively promoting racism is absolutely not an option? These are primarily critical premises in that they critique a particular curriculum, and the applied nature of education makes the reliance on critique impractical. In other words, a teacher cannot walk into a classroom and not speak or, if they do speak, simply tell students what they are not to do. What is needed for a teacher in the field, for a teacher educator addressing issues of institutionalized racism in schools or for a policy maker writing education into law, is an affirmative way forward; the teacher needs words to say to her class.

An affirmative way forward can be found in the second ontological consequence of racial realism: that if racism is real and permanent, then race, in all of its constructed, material, and discursive aspects, is real as well. By this I do not mean to claim that race is a biological reality nor to endorse any conception of race that would underwrite eugenics. Instead, I acknowledge both that there is a socially constructed aspect of racism and that there is a protean phenomenon that we refer to as race that has real consequences for our experience. In other words, an adequate response to institutionalized racism cannot be simply to deny or omit the reality of race. The epistemological claim that I will focus on in this work and that follows from the second ontological consequence of racial realism is that, since race is real, it must have certain experiential knowledge<sup>2</sup> associated with it, a conclusion with many consequences for antiracist pedagogy.



CRT scholarship is not the only literature in which realist social ontologies are applied in antiracist ways to the analysis of institutionalized racism. The ontology of race and specifically of blackness has recently been theorized in Afro-Pessimist literature in the work of Jared Sexton (2016), Christina Sharpe (2016), Saidiya Hartman (2007, 2008), Bracey (2015), George Weddington (2018), and Michael Dumas (2016b). One of the distinguishing characteristics of Afro-Pessimism is the political ontology of blackness—that it is not “solely the result of the actions and agency of black people” (Bracey, 2015, p. 283). Instead, it is constituted through the shared history of slavery and the subsequent “ontological death” (Wilderson, 2010, as quoted in Sexton, 2016, p. 5) of former slaves and those who look like them, due to society’s structural anti-Black solidarity.

### **Why We Need Racial Realism**

Much of antiracist curriculum in recent years has taken on the features of neoliberalism now embedded in the more general curriculum of American schools (Giroux, 2013). Neoliberalism is generally considered to be a theory of individualism, meritocracy, and a culture of measurable accountability that supports both (Lipman, 2011). When applied to antiracist curriculum, the consequent content taught is characterized by the inclusion of heroes, holidays, and half-truths. In February students read Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” Speech and watch videos of the Civil Rights movement, and by March they move on to study the Suffragettes and Sally Ride. Even more concerning than this tokenism are the effects of the promotion of individualism and meritocracy on students. If a student living in poverty (as the majority of public school students now are; see Layton, 2015) is being taught in a school that employs a neoliberal curriculum, the lesson that they learn is that any failure or falling behind national averages is entirely their fault because they have not worked hard enough. Based on my experience in the classroom, there is little mention of the data showing that standardized tests are designed to be biased against students who are not members of the white middle class (Campbell et al., 1997; Jones, 2018; Steele & Aronson, 1991). The effect of these measures of accountability is that students either continue to perform poorly and so are often labelled deficient as individuals, or they work to conform to the status quo in an effort to improve their scores and are, thereby, likely to leave behind any identity that was considered “other.” The effect of this curriculum on students in poverty is no different from the effects on Black and Brown students and may, in fact, be more pronounced because the individual nature of neoliberal education aims to erase the collective racial identity that could empower those students. The culture of neoliberalism in education that focuses on the individual and individual achievement or lack thereof frames racism itself as an individual affliction (Kendi, 2017) created through certain social interactions, which, thus, can be treated or cured by simply changing those interactions much the way a chronic back problem can be treated or healed by changing one’s posture.

It is important to note here that there are exceptions to these claims. In hundreds of classrooms around the country, there are teachers who are quietly or loudly pushing back against the culture of measurable accountability and individualism and thousands of others who recognize the damage being done even if they don’t have the ability to affect change. However, these classrooms remain exceptions to a much larger rule that is gaining momentum under current national education policies of financial austerity and restrictive accountability through narrow forms of measurement.

The neoliberal conception of individualism and meritocracy contrast sharply with racial realism. In a racial realist framework, because race is ontologically real as described above, its effects cannot be removed but only ameliorated through an individual's hard work. Thus, the neoliberal goal of a meritocracy of individuals where each person puts in their maximum effort and then rises to their place in society based on that performance is misguided. The only measuring stick that a student's performance can be assessed against is already racialized, promoting the students who most closely fit a specific racialized ideal. Further, by centering not only assessment and promotion but also content and instruction around this goal, students who are most "other" in relation to that ideal are forced to remove more of themselves in order to approximate the ideal in the hope of receiving promotion. Racial realism is one framework that can be used to show the fallacy in this argument by forcing the acknowledgment of the racial identities of those students deemed "other" as real and related. In other words, race cannot be ignored and the heroes, holidays, and half-truths currently making up efforts at an inclusive curriculum are not sufficient to respond to this reality.

One significant consequence of the conclusion that race and racism are ontologically real and inherent in our system is that there is no future possibility that includes our system where racism is eliminated. Thus, when a teacher envisions their future lessons, they must include in their vision that reality of racism and its actions on their teaching. Every action of teaching includes an inherent reproduction of the oppression that it may be attempting to ameliorate (Kumashiro, 2002), and so the teacher who is taking that action must first acknowledge this truth and then begin taking steps to create and enact the best possible lesson despite those limitations.

A second set of voices that informed my listening and learning was the pedagogic work of the Black Power Movement (BPM) which, while problematic in a number of ways, began to address questions of equity in our system. The BPM did not have the opportunity to implement many of the educational ideas set forth by its leaders due to government and antiBlack interference (as well as problems within the movement), but they did write down many of their pedagogic ideas. These ideas provide a jumping off point for conversations about how to teach against racism while honoring the second ontological consequence, the ontological reality of race, in a way that acknowledges the implications of racial realism.

### **Black Power Pedagogy: The Texts**

The BPM evolved in the United States to include a complex theoretical understanding and a pedagogy that it attempted to implement in its own educational programs (Austin 2006; Burke & Jeffries, 2016; Pearson, 1994). This theoretical pedagogy provides some ideas for addressing the problematics set forth by racial realism in a proactive way. It is also important to note that there were elements of the BPM that were problematic. In promoting misogyny, homophobia, and discrimination against other non-majoritarian groups. I acknowledge the critiques of the work of the BPM regarding the politics of gender, sexual orientation, bigotry against other peoples of color, and elements of drug culture and participation in narco-capitalism. I believe, however, that the work done to develop a pedagogy of positive empowerment among the Black community should not be ignored despite these failings.

The three primary texts that I will be using as the basis for Black Power Pedagogy were selected specifically because they represent varying times and perspectives within the BPM. Kwame Ture's and Charles Hamilton's (1992) book was written just before Ture (then known as

Stokely Carmichael) left the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee or SNCC and describes firsthand the SNCC political activities in the south in the 1960s. Ture would go on to be an important intellectual leader in the BPM (Pearson, 1994).

The second book, *Seize the Time*, was written by Bobby Seale (1991), the chairman of the Black Panther Party. The book was transcribed from tapes and notes made by Seale while “a political prisoner in the San Francisco County Jail in 1969 and 1970. ... *Seize the Time* was published while [he] was incarcerated and a defendant in two major political trials” (Introduction). The book was written as a manifesto, as a recruiting tool for new members, and as a fund-raiser to cover mounting legal fees. As such, I am not taking the text as a declaration of the philosophical ideal of Black Panther education.

The third and final book that I use is *Assata: An Autobiography*, written by Assata Shakur and published in 1987 during her exile in Cuba. In her forward to the book, Angela Davis asserts that

[Assata] speaks to all of us, and especially those of us who are sequestered in the growing global network of prisons and jails. At a time when optimism has receded from our political vocabulary, she offers invaluable gifts—inspiration and hope. (p. x)

When taken together, these texts offer a coherent philosophy of race and accompanying pedagogy of resistance.

In each of these texts there are two main categories of description that recur and speak to the affirmative Black Power Pedagogy. The first are descriptions of white education either endured by or observed by the authors, which help to frame the problems with education as understood by the movement and against which their pedagogy was framed. The second are descriptions of the values and practices of a Black resistance pedagogy.

## White Education

Within the writings of Black Power Leaders, we find many ideas that resonate with the first ontological consequence of racial realism, that of the permanence of racism inherent in the system, though these suggestions are by no means as well constructed as they would later become in CRT. Ture, for example, described racism as real (p. 83) and invisible within the structure of American society when he explained “no one accepts the blame. And there is no ‘white power structure’ doing it to them” (Ture & Hamilton, 1992, p. 23). Seale (1991) went further, describing how the racism was so powerful within the system that Black intellectual activists were “hav[ing] their minds so f\*\*\*ed up in the system and in pawn to the system that they couldn’t believe [that racism was systemic]” (p. 33). Shakur (2014) described the systemic invisibility of racism in her own educational experience. The goals of her education were pride and dignity and that those were to be attained by being “just as good as white people” (p. 20). The work of Ture, Seale, and Shakur all accept racism not as a contingent construction, but as systematically real and, to one degree or another, invisible.

Shakur’s (2014) quotation above points to one of the educational repercussions of permanent racism, i.e., students’ need to remove parts of themselves in a reproduction of the white middle class ideal. To be successful, a Black child must aspire to assimilate. Ture cites Kenneth Clark’s book, *Dark Ghetto*, which explains how children look to their own experiences for clues

to their identity and self-worth. His conclusion is that, through assimilative education, “[Black children] have come to believe in their own inferiority” (Ture & Hamilton, 1992, p. 29). Seale (1991) identifies the same idea as underlying Huey Newton’s effort to teach Black school children before and after school about the true history of Black Americans so that they can develop and maintain a distinctive sense of self as Black and so resist and counter the narrative being presented by the teacher (p. 105).

These three texts display a complex understanding of racism and its permanent place in the structure of mainstream education. They describe the consequences of such an education system for Black children, not in terms of improving outcomes or empowering students, but in terms of assimilation of those children into white society as inferior.

## Black Resistance

Describing education as part of a system in which racism is inherent and permanent is important in the same way the first step in treating a chronic condition is to find and describe it. The second step is to begin applying treatments, assessing those treatments, and continuing to improve the ministrations. The treatment in this case is based in the ontological reality of race, which must be acknowledged in a resistant pedagogy. The Black Power texts offer ideas for a curriculum that acknowledges such an ontological reality.

Seale (1991) was the most direct when he stated that he wants Black children to be taught their *true* history and place in present day society (p. 61). He leaves this idea of a true history unexplored, but Ture offers some clarity. He proposes actively “reclaiming” Black history and identity and not simply demanding it of the education system. “When we begin to define our own image, the stereotypes—that is, lies—that our oppressor has developed will begin in the white community and end there” (Ture & Hamilton, 1992, p. 37). And while Ture argues that stereotypes of blackness will begin and end in the white community, I would extend his claim to argue that there is the potential that those stereotypes will begin and end in certain segments of the white community as a Black Power Pedagogy is introduced in that community as well.

But how then does a teacher actively “reclaim” a “true” Black identity? Shakur (2014) offers an anecdote that gives a concrete example of a short set of lessons with the potential to reach that goal.

On the first day of the arts and crafts class i had nothing really prepared, so i asked everyone to draw themselves. When i looked at the drawings i felt faint. All the students were Black, yet the drawings depicted a lot of blond-haired, blue-eyed little white children. i was horrified. i went home and ransacked every magazine i could find with pictures of Black people. i came in early the next day and plastered the walls with pictures of Black people. We talked about what was beautiful. We talked about all kinds of beauty in the world and about all the different kinds of flowers in the world. And then we talked about the different kinds of beauty that people have and about the beauty of Black people. We talked about our lips and our noses. We made African masks out of clay and papier-mache, made African sculptures, painted pictures of Black people, of Black neighborhoods. (p. 188)

This is an example of reclaiming Black identity, of teaching Black children about their role in society as beautiful and valuable. One important aspect of this lesson that can be overlooked,

but that makes the lesson one that addresses the ontological reality of race, is that it is not merely additional content in African mask making. There is currently legislation in Oregon and other states requiring lessons be taught covering the history and welfare of Indigenous Tribes of the state. But a unit on African Masks or Indigenous Tribes can be effectively meaningless to students unless it includes the direct connection and affirmation of race itself, of the Black (or Indigenous) identity of the students, countering the racism that they experience within the education system. This is the key point. It is not enough to include unconnected content that checks a curricular box of diversity. The lessons must address, must “reclaim,” the history and identities of the students.

### **Problematizing My Work**

The teaching work that I conducted on the UDHR was informed by my education up to that point and my experiences with those students in that classroom. Since then, however, I have attempted to listen to and learn from the theoretical work of racial realism and the BPM. As I have moved through my own education and have continued to read different perspectives on teaching, I have felt as if I have seen my past teaching experience as an old Da Vinci painting, with each new perspective or framework stripping away another layer of dust or dirt to reveal more and more of the painting. And while I know that I will never see it fully in its original state and that the addition of time is fading the colors even as I seek to reveal them, the process is still important in that the purpose of this process is not to eventually see the true original painting, but instead to be a service to future painting projects. As Ewa Ziarek (2001) explains, “It is the tear, or the separation of the self from its sedimented identity, that enables a redefinition of becoming and freedom from the liberation of identity to the continuous ‘surpassing’ of oneself” (p. 39).

The narrative of teaching the UDHR viewed race and racism as important yet able to be overcome through hard work both on my part and on the part of my students, implying that the main source of any failure was their fault or mine. The UDHR curriculum is not unique in the work of educators of Black and Brown students (Dumas, 2016a), and it expresses a belief in the system of meritocracy/neoliberalism.

In light of both the description of racial realism and the explanation of why it is a necessary framework for teachers, I also see the specifics of the lessons that I taught in a new way. The UDHR contains within it articles proclaiming the rights of all people to learn, freedom from arbitrary arrest, and freedom to assemble peacefully. The lessons provided in the curriculum framed these rights as international, external, alien issues, and the students learned them as such. Arbitrary arrest applied only to dissidents in Russia. Police attacking protesters was something that happened in China. Kids weren’t allowed to learn in Afghanistan. The externalization of these rights from these students reinforced for them and for me a framework wherein I could teach and they could work hard enough to overcome and eventually achieve the rights declared to be theirs. Through the lens of racial realism, however, I can see that I was reinforcing and reproducing the indiscernible nature of anti-Black racism in this society. Through this process of reflection, I am acutely aware of how I failed my students despite (and in some ways because of) my initial feelings of success.

This problematization of my teaching narrative is necessarily brief, but it does suggest several areas of improvement for myself as a teacher. The next step in my method informed by the Black Power Movement is to envision a lesson, or in this case set of lessons, that will address these areas of improvement while maintaining the understanding that, regardless of the quality of my



lessons, they will still have elements that reinforce oppressions and that there is no magic lesson that I can teach that will end oppression. My goal in this prospective phase is to build an affirmative pedagogy with the aim of ameliorating the effects of structural racism and, thereby, improving student outcomes (Mattison & Aber, 2007; Priest et al., 2014).

### The Progressive Phase

The following narrative is my engagement with the progressive phase of *currere* and my understanding of racial realism and its consequences for teaching. It describes what a future might look like in which I had the chance to teach the UDHR curriculum again to a similar group of children. The student responses included are based on both my meditative imagination and interaction with my former students.

#### A Progression Narrative: The Imagined Speculative Future

*I took the temporary position as a fifth-grade teacher to get myself back into the classroom in the hope that it would better connect me with the future educators that I was instructing as a professor. I had not taught an elementary school class for an extended period since I left Jane Smith Elementary to begin my PhD program, and while this position would be temporary because the teacher I was replacing was on maternity leave and I was on sabbatical, I hoped to immerse myself in the world of the classroom teacher as completely as possible.*

*To say that I was nervous about this job would not be entirely accurate. A better description would be that I was full of the strained excitement usually reserved for professional athletes' pregame warmups or that moment just before the last card is flipped in a particularly tense hand of Texas Hold 'Em. I was excited to meet these students who demographically resembled my former fifth graders, excited to test my own pedagogical practice in the crucible of a public-school classroom, and excited to make changes to a curriculum that I was already familiar with. This school was employing updated versions of the UDHR modules that had been in use at Jane Smith, giving me a chance to improve upon my previous practice and improve the understanding of my students. I had researched and read a great deal of the works about education in the BPM and the works of Derrick Bell and Critical Race Theory. My ontology of race had shifted since my first pass through these lessons, and the hope was that, with this new understanding of what was possible and impossible in this society, I would be able to give my students a better experience.*

*I began the first module with an historical account of the founding of the United Nations in the wake of World War II as a second try at the League of Nations, the brainchild of President Woodrow Wilson, who said that Birth of a Nation was "like writing history with lightning. And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true." At the time of the founding of the UN, only four African countries were politically independent, Egypt (at the time under a British military presence), Ethiopia (recently liberated from Italy by Britain), Liberia (which began as a settlement of the American Colonization Society who believed Black people could never integrate into American society and must instead return to Africa), and apartheid South Africa. With this in mind, we began our reading of the declaration. The rights as outlined in the language of the UDHR were accepted at face value by the students initially, and I didn't push them while they were working to decode and understand what was in front of them. But once they had a working understanding of the*

*document, we began to discuss the rights and where we understood them to come from. We talked first about the inequality of the application of those rights, how some peoples in some places were not only denied their stated rights, but also ignored when they stood up and demanded them.*

*When we had finished the legal realist portion of our discussion, I introduced the students to several short lessons about non-western religions including Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam as well as Indigenous philosophies by Vine Deloria Jr., Manulani Aluli Meyer, and Eve Tuck. We made lists of what we understood to be the basic assumptions of those belief systems, making sure to note that these were brief studies and promising ourselves to return and do more research in the near future. With our lists in hand, we returned to the UDHR and identified places where the U.N. text ignored the ideas and beliefs of peoples that were not historically associated with Western Europe or white America. This led to the broader question of who these rights, as well as other documents that guarantee rights, were written by and for, including the Magna Carta, the Mayflower Compact, the Declaration of Independence, and the Bill of Rights. Finally, I presented pacifism as a belief system and asked students to find the right that protected their choice not to engage in war. The students were unable to find such an article.*

*As we drew to the end of the module, I asked the students to create a character that they would write a story about. This character would be someone for whom the UDHR was not written, someone who was overlooked by the writers and ignored by those who finalized the declaration. This could be a Muslim girl from India, or a Buddhist boy from Tibet, or even a Black girl from Chicago. Then I wanted them to write a story about this person going through the module that we had just completed. What would they think about us studying the UDHR, and what points would they raise in the class discussions and small groups? What would they think as we pointed out the shortcomings of the document? Their story was to continue telling about how this person decided that they should be included as humans with rights and what they would do to begin changing the UDHR. I stressed that this activity was to be realistic fiction. No one was allowed to have their main character simply place a mind-control spell on the leaders of the world and make them rewrite the declaration. The students had to do some research on the people and places that they were talking about, picking names for their characters from lists of names used in the country they had chosen. They also had to research what kinds of careers their person might have after college that might affect the UDHR. I gave the students outlines to build their stories and flesh out their characters and time both in and out of class to finish their narratives. In the end, I was apprehensive about what I was going to receive. Here are four excerpts of narratives that capture the themes I saw most often.*

**Paul:** *My story is about a boy named Chege from Kenya. ... He graduated with our class and went on to finish college in the U.S. Once he was done, he moved back to Kenya and became the secretary of education, making all education in the country free to everyone. Once education was free, all Kenyans learned about their rights and began demanding that the world treat them as equals.*

**Shawna:** *This is the story of Alicia from Honduras. ... She was the valedictorian of Harvard and when she graduated, she moved back to Honduras and started her own college, which was free. There she trained new lawyers in the UDHR and how to make sure that everyone was given their rights.*

*Daisha: Irene is from Indonesia and has been in our class with us during this module. ... When she finished her schooling and went college, she went to the University of Indonesia, which was ranked 601 in the world, and she worked so hard that it became the number 1 ranked university for girls.*

*Jaheem: I wrote about Carl who is from Washington D.C. where my auntie is from. He wanted to know why we cared so much about other places in the world when his school is not good and there aren't any jobs. ... When he graduated from college, he became a businessman and hired everyone in his old neighborhood. He paid them well and everyone could afford to buy a house and a car and send their kids to good schools. Soon other people wanted to work for him, but he always made sure that the people from his neighborhood had jobs.*

### Employing Racial Realism

I find that this narrative, while an improvement over the lessons that I remember teaching, still falls short of being the ideal anti-racist curricular unit (which I know is impossible based on my understanding of racial realism). Upon subsequent review, it also still contains elements of heteronormativity, classism, and other ideologies that reinforce our unfair social structure. The stories that the students create are also necessarily confined by the capitalist structure of our economy that is part of the structure that contains inherent racism, as well as the “merit-based” education system that has the same flaws. The next step for me is to revise this speculative narrative to again attempt to address these issues with the eventual understanding that I will teach these lessons as flawed. Engaging in this process is crucial for (white) teachers because it forces us to grapple with the necessary inadequacy of every lesson and to acknowledge the ontological reality of racism in our own teaching and, through that acknowledgement, to avoid the despair that accompanies our inadequacy and instead allows us to implement racial strategies that can bring fulfillment and even triumph (Bell, 1992a).

### Notes

1. Throughout this paper I will employ the capitalization choices employed and explained by Michael Dumas (2016b) in his article “Against the Dark: Antiracism in Education Policy and Discourse” (pp. 12–13).
2. Here the term “knowledge” is employed in the Deweyan construction of knowledge as experience (Dewey, 1938).

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# Vampiric Inquiry

## A Review of *Blood's Will: Speculative Fiction, Existence, and Inquiry of Currere*

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You know ... A wise person once told me, “write what you know.”... So, I guess this makes you a vampire. (McNulty, 2018, p. 58)

**B**LOOD'S WILL: *Speculative Fiction, Existence, and Inquiry of Currere* is a work of what McNulty (2018) calls auto-fiction, combining elements of autobiography and fiction. It uses elements of speculative fiction, including themes of horror/fantasy (in this case, the existence of vampires) in the plot. But it is also a process of educational inquiry, utilizing Pinar's (2004) method of *currere* to create “an opening to self-knowing” (Doll, 2017, p. xv). In her book, McNulty (2018) writes of her past experiences but inserts fantastical elements, leaving the reader to choose what is possible. McNulty (2018) invites her readers into not only her fiction, but also her own life, explaining,

You may believe this book is a work of fiction. It is, in as much as fiction signifies possibility. But what I have written is also true. And truth relies on limitations and finitudes. Which will you, the reader, choose? (p. 2)

I elected to follow her exploration of memory, alternate possibilities, and transformations, realizing when I finished that *Blood's Will* (2018) is not only a “vampire book,” but also a blend of both scholarly and emotional work (McDermott, 2008) that entertains as much as it showcases how *currere* is educational experience.

### The *Currere* Process

*Blood's Will* (2018) is both a work of fiction and qualitative inquiry, existing in a space made possible through Pinar's (2011) conceptualization of *currere*. The term *currere* is the Latin infinitive form of curriculum, meaning “the running of the course” (Pinar, 2004, p. 35). This

method of autobiographical storytelling fuses lived experience with fictional exploration of possibilities, “[emphasizing] the everyday experience of the individual and his or her capacity to learn from that experience; to reconstruct experience through thought and dialogue to enable understanding” (Pinar, 2011, p. 2). It is clear, then, that McNulty (2018) has included elements of her own experience within *Blood’s Will*; the autobiographical element is what provides both “the theory and practice emphasizing one’s own lived experience, enabling the individual to exist apart from institutional life, creating distance from the everyday for the sake of self-reflection and understanding” (Pinar, 2011, pp. xii–xiii). Through the process of *currere*, McNulty (2018), both as her characters and as the author, are engaging in an inquiry process that will lead to transformation.

The four stages of *currere*—the regressive, the progressive, the analytical, and the synthetical (Pinar, 2004)—are evident in McNulty’s (2018) protagonists, Campbell and Finn. Having met each other before the present time of the narrative, they are driven to regress towards past moments that have led to their existences. As their relationship deepens, they experience moments of freedom from the present (analytical) and re-entering it (synthetical). But consistently throughout the book, Campbell and Finn consider what is to come for their relationship and their lives. Their journeys through the stages of *currere* are not linear. Instead, the stages are interconnected (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980) moments that can arise at any point in time, framing a process of self-actualization.

By using *currere*, McNulty (2018) too is engaging in these steps: writing in an autobiographical form (regressive), constructing metaphoric situations for her characters to move through (analytical), re-entering her present to revise, reconstruct, and edit (synthetical), and exploring possibilities for the work of *currere* (progressive). The narrative of this auto-fiction explores possibilities through inquiry, which reflect a “middle passage ... in which movement is possible from the familiar to the unfamiliar, to estrangement, then to a transformed situation” (Pinar et al., 1995, p. 548). This middle passage of authorship is apparent in McNulty’s (2018) choice of point of view. Though McNulty (2018) is writing from her experience, she elects to tell her story in third person to be more “believable” (p. 2) as well as “cooly” (p. 2) objective. She tells readers, “I write about Campbell as if she were someone other than myself. Maybe, she is” (p. 2). Just as her protagonists undergo transformation through *currere*, so does McNulty (2018) herself, which results in Campbell, as well as *Blood’s Will* (2018) being a “déchollage”: the result of “cutting and tearing identities and ‘truths’ to reveal other interpretations” (p. 2). Campbell and *Blood’s Will* (2018) exist as representations of McNulty’s (2018) experiences but also as newly constructed possibilities.

Finn’s existence as a vampire is also a fictionalized representation of the *currere* method. *Currere* requires a slowing down of the present, opening the ability to remember and possibly re-enter the past (Pinar, 2004). Through *Blood’s Will* (2018), it is clear that like vampires depicted in a range of texts time functions differently for him; however, it is not only his journey, but his very placement within the text that reflects *currere*. Finn is a singular featured supernatural element juxtaposed with an otherwise (and, at times, perhaps all too) realistic setting. He is in love with an overworked, undervalued professional academic, wife, and mother. While Campbell begins the book considering what happiness may mean under the limits of her existence, discovering that vampires inhabit the same world prompts her to question what all is actually possible: What realities are achievable when even existence as you have always known it can be altered?

### Blurring of Binaries

Forms of *currere* blur binaries between “real” memories and fiction; yet, both are constructed from the mind’s work to fill in gaps and make sense of the world. Neither memories nor fiction are “true” or “facts,” but memories are often held in a binary opposed to fiction (McNulty, 2018). When Campbell recalls her childhood memories, she presents the reader with depictions of her friends, family, and Finn, all of whom are tied to her present. Her past is “shared” (Pinar, 2004, p. 135) by all of these characters and, thus, is not simply her subjective experience (McNulty, 2018). Instead, *currere* creates a method for exploring multiple subjectivities, which “destabilizes” the idea that there needs to be one “essential [meaning]” (Gough, 1994, p. 554).

McNulty’s (2018) characterization also contributes to the blurring of binaries. Both Campbell and Finn exist in a “middle passage” (Pinar et al., 1995, p. 548) of possibilities. Finn lies in between the human and supernatural. He possesses otherworldly abilities and, at times, is driven by his need for blood, but he is motivated far more by his human desires for community and love. He is neither human nor what readers would expect from a “monster.” Likewise, Campbell too blurs binaries of professional and lover, as well as mother and lover. At times, her actions are not what one would expect from a devoted mother, scholar, or wife, which challenges readers’ perceptions of her. But because *Blood’s Will* (2018) blurs binaries of what it means to be a “good” or “bad” character, the result of reading is not a dividing practice (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). While Finn’s existence creates a sense of wonder for readers, requiring them to accept the magical realism for the plot to make sense, Campbell’s journey of self-exploration makes readers ask the timeless question, “Can she have it all?” As a work of pure autobiography, McNulty (2018) would be putting her life on display for possible criticism, but by creating characters who reflect aspects of her life, she is able to represent gray areas of humanity, where a choice for one’s own happiness may not lead to happiness for all. As Doll (2017) explains, “Fiction—more than fact—teaches wisdoms about the human condition precisely because fiction connects readers with what courses within themselves” (p. 48); hence, the method of *currere* enables McNulty’s (2018) past, present, and future possibilities to become larger than a personal process. Now, her characters, or aspects of herself, are symbols of very identifiable searches for existences they can live within.

### McNulty’s Artistry

*Blood’s Will* (2018) is a standalone work of *currere*, but it is also an articulate culmination of McNulty’s (2018) thoughts on artistic forms of inquiry that have been developing for some time. Ten years before *Blood’s Will* (2018) was published, McNulty’s “Created Worlds and Crumbled Universes” came to readers through *Creating Scholartistry: Imagining the Arts-Informed Thesis or Dissertation* (McDermott, 2008). Her chapter “[explored] the ways that thinking and being collide, explode, and emerge, like the birth of a star, to create an arts-informed research study” (McDermott, 2008, p. 136). Though she did not directly engage in *currere* at that time, McNulty’s feelings towards the writing process seem to reflect early preparation and exploration for what she would produce in *Blood’s Will* (2018). As with *currere*, McNulty tells readers that arts-informed inquiry “requires complete immersion of the whole being: knowledges, feelings, memories, hopes, and fears” (McDermott, 2008, p. 138). She describes her memories as an “inner labyrinth” forming from “the myriad of possibilities that swirl around each of us every second of every day, making order out of chaos” (p. 143). The references to memories and

possibilities echo Pinar’s (2004) explanation of *currere*. Though she does not call it *currere* in that early work, McNulty’s beliefs on the relationships between events clearly carry to her book years later, with characters going through the processes she describes: “I believe that life events past, present, and future produce a kaleidoscopic lens through which we construct, disrupt, define, and embody notions of ‘self,’ ‘reality,’ and ‘truth’” (McDermott, 2008, p. 137). From examining McNulty’s earlier process of arts-based inquiry and writing, it is clear that *currere* is an artistic process (McDermott, 2008), making *Blood’s Will* (2018) a work of art.

### ***Blood’s Will* as Educational Experience**

Critiques of creative curricular methods may ask, “[W]hat does all this myth, memory and dream stuff have to do with curriculum?” (Doll, 2017, pp. xiv–xv). First, this blend of autobiography, fiction, and engaging with texts has the ability to create educational situations that “release” (Greene, 2001) learners from “definitive proofs” (McNulty, 2018, p. 243). By regressing into the past, *currere* can help “recover those moments when imagination ... [could] open worlds” (Greene, 2001, p. 179), resulting in new possibilities for the future. In her “Afterword,” McNulty (2018) tells readers that, like Campbell, she faced a similar struggle with asking herself “What if...?” (p. 245). Visually, there is a purposeful ellipsis for the reader—a space not held with words, but instead an opening for interpretive possibility. *Currere* asks learners to explore “What if...?” (p. 245), valuing all possibilities, even the notion that a vampire can exist in an otherwise realistic setting. Doll (2017) reminds readers that, as *currere* means “‘running’ of the course,” “it is the self that runs that course” (pp. xiv–xv); consequently, there are as many possibilities as the self will allow, which should be what education emphasizes.

Pinar (2011) recognizes that an issue in the United States’ educational system is that “the human subject has been split from the school subject” (p. xi). The school subject is traditionally defined as what is taught or learned (“content”), while students’ needs, emotions, and characters are not often included in this content (Pinar, 2011). *Currere* is an opposition to this traditional educational structure, allowing students to enter into biographic situations (Pinar, 2004). Meaning is explored, destabilized, and transformed from an individual’s past experiences. Doll (2017) sees this regression into “personal histories” as a natural “urging” (p. xiii). Students seek to understand themselves as well as their world. Pinar (2011) determines subjectivity as necessary for education, adding that it is where “we begin to know ourselves and the world we inhabit and that inhabits us” (p. 8); thus, *currere* puts the needed human element back into the educational process. *Blood’s Will* showcases how entangled McNulty’s (2018) subjective experience has been with her academic learning. Her book reveals that “there is a curriculum to each of our lives” (McNulty, 2018, p. 1).

*Blood’s Will* (2018) is also an example of how referenced texts can serve as points for inspiration, not simply documentation of what has been learned. When engaging in *currere*, the individual’s experience within the curriculum is privileged, allowing the writer to distinguish what texts create meaning. Texts outside of an academic cannon may be drawn from. In *Blood’s Will*, McNulty (2018) is able to reference a variety of texts that contributed to her lived experience, from bell hooks’s (1995) *Art on my Mind* to Whedon’s (1998) *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, with the amount of emphasis she desires, not what traditional education would dictate. But it is not enough to cite them; McNulty (2018) draws from these texts to shape the characterization, dialogue, and fictional elements of her work. Though both employed as professional academics, Campbell and Finn



discuss vampires as they would other scholarly subjects, referring to examples throughout history (McNulty, 2018). Through her active incorporation of sources, it is clear not only *what* meant something to her in various stages of her past, but *why* it did. In a world of education where citing textual evidence is continuously emphasized, *currere* offers students ways to have meaningful interactions with sources.

### What Happens at the End?

Many consider the above question while reading a work of fiction. At times, this question propels them to keep reading, considering possibilities. When there is, in fact, an end, so many possibilities are diminished. The reader has the answers. *Blood's Will's* (2018) plot has to end. After all, it is a printed text that has been bound with a certain number of pages. But McNulty (2018) views fiction differently from beginnings and endings, explaining that fiction “is the opposite of finitude” (p. 4). Her views towards time are expressed in the existence of Finn, a vampire who is reunited with someone from his past, made possible because his supernatural lived experience allows time to fold, rupture, and overlap (McDermott, 2008, p. 147). Appropriately, *Blood's Will* (2018) does not include resolution so much as it offers possibilities. If *Blood's Will* is a result of McNulty's (2018) artistic inquiry into her lived experience, “the end is always the beginning” (McDermott, 2008, p. 136). Artistic inquiry and *currere* are both nonlinear, and often circular, methods. *Currere* is a process of “self-shattering, revelation, confession, and reconfiguration” (Pinar, 2004, p. 55). Campbell ends the book physically and metaphorically shattered, which will again spark a new process of “self-understanding” and “self-motivation” (Pinar, 2004, p. 55). There is no end for Campbell, just as there is no end for McNulty (2018), who tells readers on her first page that she is “the subject writing herself” (p. 1). As a reader, I considered what would be next for McNulty (2018) as much as I did for Campbell and Finn. The process of *currere* allows memories to not only reflect the past, but also to serve as “catalysts for future action” (McNulty, 2018, p. 4), making me wonder what both author and characters will explore when any future action is possible.

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