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THE SHADOWS OF LIBERATION: CREATING HOPE AND MEANING IN CREATIVE SELF-STUDY INQUIRY

ABSTRACT: In this essay, the author intends to examine how his experience isolating at home during the Covid pandemic unfolded as a generative self-study experience. After a chance discovery of old photos and artifacts from his teenage years, he began a *currere* (a self-study of educational and curricular associations) from when he was a high school (secondary) student. In this *currere* he reconstituted more than remembered the past, emphasizing free association in the four stages (regressive, progressive, analytic, synthetic) of *currere*. In the study he exposes the distortion of his memories in relation to dominant (and marginalizing) normative discourses and discusses their erasure. In this process he tells how he experienced an epiphany in the recovery of a youthful narrative of joy, hope, and resistance. This initial study, in which the author emphasized the value of subjectivity, laid the foundation for additional projects examining the role of subjectivity more broadly in academic studies. These projects included an edited book on Applied Linguistics and a special journal issue on the topic of curricular epistemicide and erasure.

KEYWORDS: self-study inquiry; *currere*; queer narratives; memory and discourses; erasure.

As an introvert, I've always been drawn to interior spaces (with outside views). When I was a child in Seattle, I would contrive to miss elementary school to stay in my bedroom and construct tiny cities. Cardboard, Popsicle sticks, tape, and string encircled my bed and climbed to the window. Then, before anyone got home, I would tear them down and keep all traces of my constructed cities secret, safeguarding their personal meaning. As I hit adolescence, I would go into the cellar of our house and by the hour attempt to decipher symbols and hidden messages in Dylan and Stones' songs. Much later, as a graduate student I lived in New York, in a fifth-floor tenement flat. Around me I photographed hermetic spaces, such as airshafts in the core of stone buildings, tiles on subway walls, and deep layers of dirt in the snow. When my partner and I traded Portland for New York, we bought a "fixer" house with a tiny yard, which we enclosed with fencing to keep Chloe, our beloved New York German Shepherd, from bounding freely through the neighborhood of wooden houses.

With the arrival of Covid isolation, I began to experience a new existential awareness, a condition described by Maxine Greene (1971) in *Curriculum and Consciousness*:

The stage sets are always likely to collapse. [...] Disorder [...] is continually breaking in; meaninglessness is recurrently overcoming landscapes which once were demarcated, meaningful. It is at moments like these that the individual reaches out to reconstitute meaning, to close the gaps,

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to make sense once again. It is at moments like these that he will be moved to pore over maps, to disclose or generate structures of knowledge which may provide him unifying perspectives and thus enable him to restore order once again. (Greene, 1971: 4)

The normative stage sets of my life collapsed. I was no longer the “good academic”. Isolated at home, my thoughts started to fixate on memories from high school that I had labeled as traumatic and had long kept boxed away.

In high school I was gay, but deeply “in the closet”. There, as I tried to disconnect myself (without success) from my attractions, I kept hearing the clinical and scientific words that described being gay: “homosexual”, “deviant”, “sick”. I knew that even though these words attempted to appear detached and scientific, they were nested within traditions of hate that threatened jail time for acts of love. When I thought about those years, I was always left with depression, alienation, and feelings of institutional and even personal abuse on the part of teachers. And these feelings became more potent as the memories became increasingly wrapped in normative messages and lessons. Then, with my stage sets collapsing, I had an epiphany: I was the tool of the trauma; I created the labels that continued to depress. Reading queer theory at the time, which emphasizes the recentering of normative discourses with those operating on the margins, I felt empowered in my bubble to re-examine painful memories.

This isolation presented me with an opportunity to explore a central dilemma in self-study inquiry: the more personally meaningful the topic, the more inaccessible. Memory, as Richard Restak (2022) has found, is often distorted and deformed: dominant discourses (e.g., those involving not only joy and success, but also trauma and oppression) frame memories, channel perceptions of the past, and reinscribe ways of thinking and acting in the present and the future. Distorted memories mask, deny, or revise history, disconnecting embodied and lived experience from a new retelling of that history (Pinar, 2012). Experiences that run counter – including diverse ways of knowing or actions of resistance, for example – may be lost within the sedimented process of memory revision (Flores, 2002; Foucault, 1972, 1990).

For me, the examination of my high school experience was important and challenging for two reasons. First, I sought to examine a painful experience as a context of analysis. And second, I knew that to begin to be successful in that process, I would need to take a more subjective and embodied approach to the inquiry. I wanted to push the boundaries of self-study inquiry out to allow me to try to reconstruct my memories of experiences for them to be closer to their initial existential rawness: that is, I wanted to challenge and combat the regulatory effects of historical memory. In a way, I considered this inquiry a critical case of the value of embodied self-study.

My School as Artifact and Channel of American Education: The Sounds of Silence

My old high school building sat on the ridge of a steep hill. Built in 1908, the massive sandstone and cement building resembled a custom house more than a schoolhouse. Its appearance proclaimed an allegiance to empire and tradition, underscoring its mission to inculcate traditional American values. As William F. Pinar (2005) states, the goal of public education in America was to socialize children into a common (*i.e.*, normative) national identity.

And much of this identity revolved around maintaining privilege for Protestant white men of wealth (Pinar et al., 2008). In 1896, for example, just 20 years before my school's founding, the U.S. Supreme Court in the case of *Plessey versus Ferguson* decided that "separate but equal" was legal, thus codifying legal segregation within the country, including the American public school system. In 1954 in the case *Brown versus the Board of Education of Topeka*, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Plessey*, calling for the integration of public schools with, ambiguously, "all due haste". Throughout this history, Indigenous residential schools – where Indigenous children lived separated from their families and communities – resolved to "take the Indian out of the child" (Bombay, Matheson & Anisman, 2014: 329).

Since segregation was illegal when I attended high school, racial policies had become regulated by curricular and societal factors, no longer by formal laws. And while the formal public school curriculum may have touted freedom and liberty for all, the hidden curriculum (Apple, 1975; McLaren, 1989) was more demanding, emphasizing obedience to a rigid social hierarchy (Spring, 2016). At the same time, the null curriculum (Eisner, 1985; Flinders, Noddings & Thornton, 1986), silently projected by alienated (but not privileged) students to highlight possibilities perhaps made more compelling by their absence, created a tense subtext within the school, one blocked by thick Doric columns flanking the school's doors.

Currere as a Method of Liberation

*Tell me a story about how you adore me
Live in the shadow, see through the shadow
Glimpse through the shadow, tear at the shadow
Hate in the shadow, and love in your shadowy life
Have you seen your mother, baby, standing in the shadow?
(Jagger & Richards, 1966)*

Before beginning my inquiry, I considered some of the arguments against self-study in general: that it's mere "navel gazing", subjective and biased, individualistic, and limited, self-indulgent, and, using a term from quantitative inquiry, not "valid". To challenge

these criticisms, I selected *currere* as a framework that could elevate the inquiry and transcend their perceived limitations.

As a methodology, *currere* has four moments: the analytical (deconstructing), the synthetical (reconstructing), the regressive (accessing past memories and experiences), and the progressive (reconceptualization) (Pinar, 2012). Although these movements are often described as discrete steps, most people working with *currere*, myself included, conceive of them as synergistic and dialogic (Pinar, 2012).

A Brief Overview of the Method

In terms of procedure, I followed a few clear steps in my self-study. To re-enter the past, I examined and juxtaposed photos from the time period, including both candid yearbook photos (representing the formal curriculum) and my own photography (representing the informal curriculum). I sought to isolate these experiences and events from their larger narrative structures, from – to return to the words of Greene (1971) – their props and stage settings.

As I used queer theory from the present to examine the past, I examine these events as examples of oppression as well as strategies of resistance and survival. With queer theory, I examined experiences that I once considered marginal and peripheral as central to my experience. My intent was to re-experience the spontaneous and organic interactions and transactions between me and others in the free spaces of the school surrounding the more formal classrooms. Basically, I used queer theory as a lens to help to dislodge my memories from the psychic and historic shadows growing around them over the years.

Then, moving in the opposite direction, I held the patterns and associations from the past up to the present: what did the erasure of identity in the past change in the present? What were the past-and-present connections between the de jure regulation of gay identity and the de facto regulation of racial identity? And how are on-going discourses of homophobia dismantled and new possibilities for interaction established?

Free-Association and Duoethnography: Opening the Text

Within this process, I focused on free association. Pinar mentions the use of this psychoanalytic technique in order to trigger the recollection of repressed material and memories (Pinar, 2012: 46). This surfacing of repressed memories opens possibilities for inquirers to recreate past experiences in their initial, raw state. The goal was to dislodge these experiences from the norming of memory occurring with a buildup of negative associations and self-judgments – internalized trauma – over time (Pinar,

2012: 46). Furthermore, I highlighted personal reflexivity as a bridge between these four steps, foregrounding openness to new conceptions and possibilities for change for myself and others. Here I sought to embody a null curriculum of hope from my organic and at times messy friendships, relationships, and desires.

To further open the text and attempt to reconstruct my experience, not simply to remember it (Seidman, 1991), I turned to an arts-based duoethnography approach (Sawyer, 2017). My goal was to alienate and decontextualize artifacts to expose their meanings and hidden scripts. To immerse myself more deeply into the process, I borrowed tenets from duoethnography to heighten the dialogic process and promote heteroglossia, a multi-voiced text (Bakhtin, 1981; Sawyer & Norris, 2013; 2015). Duoethnography is a self-study methodology rooted in *currere*, following its general tenets. Its studies are stratified, nested explorations of a given research context, question, or critical issue by two participants working in tandem. Duoethnography seeks to promote new perspectives and change (in complex interconnected research ecologies) by engaging the researchers with a multi-dialogic process that supports a shattering of preconceived views. Employing Antoinette Oberg and Teresa Wilson's (1992) adage that researchers who use the autobiographical method should be the site, not the topic, of their research, duoethnography allows researchers to explore how their lives have been situated socially and culturally. Duoethnographers seek to discover and explore their overlapping gray zones and in-between perspectives as intertwined intersections that create hybrid identities, instead of binary opposites.

Mixing *Currere* with Queer Theory

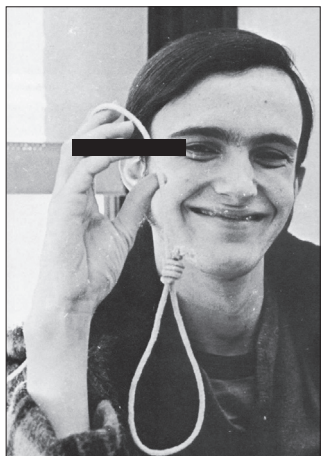
To highlight the non-linear and non-rational aspects of my past-present-and-future-oriented life, I crossed *currere* with queer narrative theory (Warhol & Lanser, 2015). In contrast to Western narratives, queer narrative emphasizes a weaving of intertextual meanings. Modern narrative (in contrast to postmodern and post-structural narrative) emphasizes problem formation, causality, conflict, character development and resolution/conclusion – Western cultural constructions. Often these constructions support homophobic and misogynistic conclusions. Queer narrative theory examines how textual conventions within the composition itself – such as, for example, foreshadowing, linear development, characters' insights, authorial voice, and conclusive endings – conspire to maintain larger meta-discourses. Queer narrative, on the other hand, disrupts categorical and defining meta-narratives and spaces and creates a problematizing dialogue among its elements (*e.g.*, images, perspective, plot). Even the authority of the writer over the characters (or self as character in *currere*) is contested and uncertain (de Villiers, 2012). Instead of being driven by a neat causality, the story line is situated,

relational, and emergent: the relationships are arranged and even rearranged in the text in multiple readings.

Through the Past Lightly: Entering the Self-Study

Working by myself, I promoted dialogue in my *currere* by selecting and then placing in dialogue dissimilarities among the artifacts (*i.e.*, a grading rubric, yearbook photos, and my own photos), contrasting perceptions within shifting time periods, and contrasting narratives: throughout, I tried to hear different voices within the created polyphonic text.

Given that the yearbook photos were taken by other people, I tried to examine their evocative power as found artifacts embedded in the school's culture. Evocative images request a response from a viewer (Sameshima & Irwin, 2008). To promote a transaction between me and the photos, I needed to let the photos and their captions engage me in a layered dialogue (Sawyer, 2017; Sameshima & Irwin, 2008). Jana Prikryl (2010) describes photography's beautiful disruptive evocation: "The way a photograph lops off a slice of reality, severing it from the narrative flow of time, is a seductive thing: it acts like a little hammer to the reflex in our brain that wants to tell stories" (Prikryl, 2010: 29). Ironically, given that the yearbook photos were intended to tell a story of supremacy, I viewed them as artifacts of disruption. Their double codings (Dimitriadis & McCarthy, 2001) – their 1970s comforting meanings clashing with their current obviously bigoted meanings – destabilized the mainstream narrative.

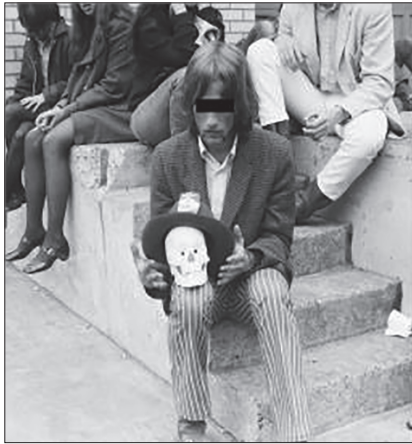


Especially in the candid shots, I returned once more to the limited curriculum of powerful white men, the daily implicit homophobia, racism, sexism, and misogyny in the classrooms, hallways, and public spaces of the school. These were images of hate that had begun to envelop and dominate my memories of high school. These photos were underscored by one of my old report cards with a grading rubric on the back. The rubric emphasized behavior, docility, and good work habits for struggling students and initiative and dominance for advanced students.

Examining these artifacts, I began to expose the pedagogical meanings of my school: that work and work habits and accompanying mechanisms of control differed for various groups of students, that the official knowledge was static Western knowledge, and that student initiative needed to reflect that static knowledge. Troubling to me was that the story of the yearbook did more than exclude me. It rendered my (and maybe that of another

one-fourth of the school) story invisible. And perhaps most troubling was the fear, the certainty, that I had been shaped by the school's focus on normative, conventional, and authoritative knowledge and processes. As Michel Foucault (Foucault 1972; 1990) revealed, historical institutions, such as schools, can be seen as both the form and site – the discourse and its artifact – of the continuation of entrenched power. Their codes and messages are pedagogical; they help shape who we are.

Following the analysis of the yearbook, I examined photos that I took myself in high school, images of interactions around the margins of the school – the courtyard beyond the cafeteria, the alleys surrounding the school, and the urban renewal surrounding the Space Needle¹, at the bottom of the hill. Juxtaposing the yearbook photos with my own photos, I engaged a clash of stories – official and explicit stories, missing stories, and subliminal ones – which jumped out at me. Working with the photos, I took an arts-based approach: the original photos would trigger original thoughts and memories; they would take me back to a deeper connection with the past and break current associations clouding original meanings in my experiences captured by the photos.



Reflections: The Changing of Moonlight to Sunlight²

With this process, I re-entered experience I had begun to forget. In the courtyard by the cafeteria, my friends and I talked about revolution, the manipulation of art and images, and music (clothing of course was central to our identity, but we never talked about it). It's hard to describe the organic and lived creation of knowledge we engaged in, but it differed greatly from the Western certainty of the academic knowledge found in the classrooms. In the school courtyard, knowledge emerged in dialogues and was

¹ The Space Needle is a high observation tower in Seattle.

² From a song by Campbell and Ford (1969).

verified by multiple perspectives and layered consensuses of difference. I replaced the shadows from the hidden curriculum with a sense of joy, solidarity, and even liberation. And I realized that the normative narrative of high school continued to express the very oppression I rebelled against at the time.

Using *currere*, which is rooted in curriculum theory, I was also able to examine the myriad curricular entanglements surrounding my experiences. These entanglements included first and foremost the official curriculum at the school, which emphasized formal knowledge in support of the dominant group in America (white, powerful, and primarily male). It included the hidden curriculum, which reinforced social-and-political hegemony around the formal curriculum. The hidden curriculum resonated within students' awareness, interactions with, and possible internalizations of the inadvertent messages about power, knowledge, identity, and value. In my case, the hidden curriculum stressed that knowledge and voice from BIPOC (Black and Indigenous people of color), women, and LGBTQ people held little value in contrast with that of dominant discourses. And it included the null curriculum, which was present by its absence. The richness of the knowledge created in the margins of the school played a discordant beat to the official curriculum as I sat in class and gazed at that sign of progress, the Space Needle, at the bottom of the hill. I wondered about equity, justice, and fairness, as well as creativity and the complexity of representation.

As a methodology, *currere* facilitated lived and embodied entanglements within the inquiry. This embodied process is reflected in the reflexive nature of *currere*: in my case it triggered an awareness of social justice and personal motivation for self-and-societal change. The critical and psychoanalytic evaluation of my changing life added a lived and generative dynamic to my work in critical life-history inquiry. And the solitude provided a guarded reflexivity. Two studies came from this situation (*i.e.*, Sawyer, 2022a; 2022b).

A Psychic Reorganization

Following this first study and empowered, perhaps, by my high school epiphany, I began a project to digitize old artifacts, photos, negatives, short stories, letters, and journals. Going through my boxes, I started noticing my snapshots and writings from when I was young jammed into shoe boxes and envelopes. Disjointed and mixed up, images from my high school experience in Seattle in the 1970s were juxtaposed with short stories and letters from later in the decade, and inter-mixed with old lesson-plans were those from my early days as a teacher in San Francisco in the 1980s. Confused, perhaps experiencing cognitive dissonance, I decided to examine these fractured images

which, in their decontextualized chaos, had lost their comforting grounding, becoming mysterious, raw, and open to new meanings.

I began to organize them by form (letters, short stories, journal/autobiographical pieces) and topic. For the first time in decades, I went through my old papers and found more messages from the past. I think I avoided them for so long to avoid feeling embarrassed by the immaturity and naivety of the writing.

Here is a line from an unfinished love letter my 23-year-old self never sent: “You give me respite from myself”. On another piece of paper, in a short story, I described a character wandering through a bookstore during a lunch break in downtown Seattle:

Sam stepped through the literature section, glancing at the titles, and thought: Something to see with...mirrors...a preface, footnotes...glass, illumination, glass illuminating glass...what? What? What? What?... ready to shatter into cracks, freeing shifts reforming galvanized sights...cracks experience to experience the threshold of it...it...understanding...a book?... print on an opened page?

In another story a character had a doppelganger who was (unlike the original character) bold, playful and dynamic. A second story furthered the theme of the psychic shadow, this time in a negative way, expressing inhibitions, regulatory memories, and mental hallways going nowhere.

Although the writing appeared a little self-conscious, I was surprised to find that I liked much of it, including its fluidity and close illustration of the moment. And I was struck by the continuities between then and now: the story’s themes stand out with shocking relevance. One of the stories, “The Shadow”, examines the Jungian concept of the shadow and its distortion of our lives and perceptions. How do we break from the trauma of childhood (or life) when that trauma encircles us in on-going interactions? And then there was “The Double” and the liberation of examining and experiencing your life through the perceptions of another (echoing my work in duoethnography). In some ways, now, I see that I have been writing the same unfinished conclusion to the same short stories all my life – for decades now. I see how the pages of my academic life can be randomly scattered throughout the pages of my creative work from four decades earlier and no one would suspect that they weren’t written with the older material.

And then I was struck by the epiphany that, before reading them, I had internalized the very mechanisms of erasure and censorship at play in my school (and society): without re-reading the writings, I felt embarrassed by them and considered them sentimental and poorly written scraps from another and fortunately removed life. I realized that the erasures in my life were probably not exceptional or especially meaningful, but they did underscore for me a process that probably occurs millions of times in myriad ways for diverse people: people are pushed to the margins of society by discourses that erase them.

Sitting at home in isolation during the pandemic, I wondered if other people were aware of how aspects of their identity, history, and culture were missing from mainstream school curriculum. And I decided with Dan Ness, my co-editor of the *Northwest Journal of Teacher Education*, to do a special journal issue on the topic of curricular epistemicide. I considered curricular epistemicide as the process by which different aspects of formal education privilege narrow epistemologies about what counts as knowledge. They often operate to standardize, classify, and sort students. The initial framing for the special issue was based on the work of João Paraskeva (2016). He asks us to reconsider the definition of what counts as curriculum in formal educational settings: whose knowledge should be included, who is the curriculum for, what are the ends of the curriculum in question, and how can we disrupt and generate a dialogic and generative curriculum?

This topic is especially relevant in my country, the United States, at this moment. The official public-school curriculum is intentionally being narrowed and prescribed with standardized testing and regimes of accountability (*i.e.*, public report cards for schools based on student test scores). Books related to LGBTQ and Black identity and experience are being removed from schools and libraries. And school boards, which determine much of what public schools teach, are being taken over by archly conservative groups of people.

For me, doing a special journal issue is almost like engaging in magic. You send out a call for articles into cyberspace and leave the form and content of the special issue open to chance and serendipity. In our case, we were overwhelmed by a multitude of excellent article submissions. They arrived from people who wrote about erasure, the bigotry of school boards, and the neoliberal policies of NGOs in Southeast Asia. They also discussed arts-based resistance to epistemicide, self-study methods to extricate oneself from neoliberal discourses, and new methodologies to study missing history.

Conclusion

We are now³ almost in the third year of the Covid pandemic and, although people are still dying, the health emergency seems to be abating. People have returned to work, face masks are no longer required, and new vaccines and boosters are on the assembly line. Now, when I reflect back to when I isolated at home, I realize that much of my obsession was about the shadows of unresolved trauma from the past. Interior spaces of subjectivity, intuition, and meaning – these spaces are suspect in formal education, research, and business.

³ Late 2022.

However, engaging in critical self-study research, I was able to access and reconstruct memories that gave me hope in the past and suggest that resistance to totalitarian and authoritarian regimes is possible. It also showed me that memory can norm views of history and the past, itself erasing examples of counter-narratives and messy, complex experience.

Covid pulled me back into my interior space, but not as one of darkness and sublimation. Pushing the boundaries of self-study inquiry out allowed me to reconstruct experiences that were closer to their initial existential rawness and to authentic interactions and human connection. Rather, Covid isolation helped me to experience this space as one of poises, as a source of creativity and soul: it showed me, again, that light comes from within, and the interior may illuminate the exterior.

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