

# ON *CURRERE*, STORYTELLING, & BODY-POSITIVE CURRICULUM

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This paper will explore how educational spaces might provide healing and cultivate wellness by utilizing curricular tools based in *currere*, narrative, and counter-story as a force to fortify healthy self-esteem in women and girls. It examines the following questions:

1. How does personal experience connect to the larger narrative of socially policed women's and girls' bodies?
2. How do we reorient youth with a healthy body image, build shame resilience, and encourage young women and girls to resist hegemonic cultural beauty norms?
3. What possibilities exist for curriculum to develop body positivity in women and girls through narrative and counter-storytelling?

## RESILIENCE, RESISTANCE, AND LEARNING TO LOVE OUR BODIES

The shame that permeates the collective, female psyche in regard to body size is deeply rooted in dehumanizing, social narratives that we digest daily. Ideals perpetuated about what women should look like come from the media, our communities, and even our own families. Brené Brown (2006) describes what she calls the “shame web,” in which narrow socio-cultural expectations about who and what women are supposed to be, in conjunction with other identities, are enforced by schools, workplaces, places of worship, family members, and so on, then re-enforced by television, film, advertising, and media in general (p. 46). Brown (2006) defines shame as “an intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and, therefore, unworthy of acceptance or belonging” and specifically identifies appearance and body image as some of the places women most commonly expressed experiencing feelings of shame (pp. 45, 48).

Resilience to shame or “Shame Resilience Theory (SRT),” as articulated by Brown (2006), requires the integration of power and empathy to foster the agency needed in order to critically understand broader cultural systems and a to foster a communal connection to others with mutual experiential or perceived understanding (Brown, 2006). “Connection [allows us] to move away from the social/cultural trappings of the shame web by working with others to redefine what is valuable and important” (Brown, 2006, p. 47).

Educational models designed to intentionally build collective “connection, power, and freedom” that generate feelings of empathy from shared experience are necessary for developing shame resilience (Brown, 2006, p. 47). Resistance to broader harmful cultural expectations is a group effort. Building collective resilience to cultural body shaming is an act of resistance. “Resistance and human agency can become central elements in the struggle for social justice in [education] and in society” (Giroux, 1983, p. 257). Decolonizing the female body will not be easy. However, I contend that, as educational spaces can also be colonizing spaces, we might channel energies that intentionally center experiences of women and girls for collective healing.

## **BODY LOVE AS AN ACT OF RESISTANCE A REGRESSIVE COUNTER-NARRATIVE TO BODY SHAME**

My relationship to my own body has always been a complicated one. Much of it has been shaped by external forces firing at me from all sides. Sometimes my body feels like a prison, holding in the spirit that longs to be free—free of judgement from the outside world, free of the fear that follows my body, free to be part of the earth.

As a person with African ancestry possessing female anatomy, everybody and their mama has an opinion about my body. This has continually shaped how I've seen myself throughout my lifetime. My hair, my breasts, my waist, my butt, my womb, my vagina, my skin, my brain, my voice have all been subject to social and political debate. Without realizing or asking for it, attempting to live freely in my body has been a radical, political act.

In my mid-twenties, something fundamental happened for me, I began to realize that I might not be the hideous beast society had led me to believe. Around this time, I discovered body-positive blogs with beautiful women of all sizes expressing themselves and seeing themselves as objectively beautiful. It may seem artificial, but media images of beauty that surround us in the U.S. can be quite damaging. By only glorifying standards of beauty that are ultimately white, slender, with flowing hair, we are ruling out all other forms of beauty.

Growing up in the 90s, it was the cultural norm to straighten black hair, so I had my first relaxer at 3 years old. A harsh chemical substance was used to beat my natural curl into paper-straight submission. I would not know what my natural hair texture actually felt like until the age of 25. I'm not sure when it became clear to me that women were supposed to be tiny wasted with giant boobs and an ample bottom. Perhaps Sir Mix A Lot's "Baby Got Back" provided some guidance for the ideal proportions of 36-24-36.

Many young people develop eating disorders in an effort to fit these beauty standards. Our food system is driven to help large corporations make profits and are not held accountable to public health standards. This leaves individuals to navigate complicated scientific information about caloric, fiber, and protein intake. When I was growing up, "diet" food meant seeing actual nutritional value decline. This is not to dismiss western medicine. I love my doctors now, but most medical professionals in my experience were of little help. Going to the doctor was like awaiting the guillotine. I experienced annual berating for my failings as a 14 year old to deeply understand the emotional and physical implications of my eating habits. The advice was "lose more weight or, when you grow up, you will get heart disease and die; you will get diabetes and die; or at least you will get arthritis and be in a wheelchair." Thanks for that information. Now, what the hell am I supposed to do? It also baffles me that people who under-eat are labeled as having eating disorders and in need of great mental health and medical care. However, if you over-eat, you are simply a fat failure. Go on a diet and fix this on your own you clown! But, don't worry. There is a billion dollar "diet" industry waiting to capitalize on your insecurities, that most likely won't help you in any significant way. Or, perhaps your doctor might prescribe you with a mild form of "speed" to help you...ya know...get "healthy." Yes, of course it is important for public health advocates to promote healthy lifestyles and eating habits. That is good for everyone, regardless of your size. But, fat shaming and body shaming young women does not lead to better health outcomes.

The relationship I have with my body is one of the most profound of my life. It is such a complex, semi-abusive thing, because I was taught to hate it. All of my "flaws"

were visible for the critics to observe. But, the harshest critic is me, running on loop in my head, telling me what a failure I am. The challenge with this relationship is that I cannot separate myself from my body. There is no possibility for annulment or divorce. At some point, however, I realized that it is possible to banish the inner critic to a different corner of my mind and invite in an inner, affirming voice. She can have the front row seats to cheer me on. Give me sage advice and fuel the engine that had been used for self-loathing, toward self-compassion and love. I feel really grateful for the fact that the outside forces surrounding me are changing the narrative as well. People much braver than I are screaming loudly about their experiences and publicly taking back ownership over their self-esteem and perceptions of worth. These women who dance, sing, vogue, and werk their bodies, despite being bigger, give me courage to do the same. Pushing forward in the world and moving through the forces that refuse to acknowledge my worth is, on its own, an act of resistance. So, instead of yearning to look like someone else, I'm going to dance, and sing, and love, and laugh in the only body that I have been given. Mine.

### **BODY-POSITIVE CURRICULUM FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS**

*Currere* provided a guide to navigate my auto-biographical body story. Using the method prompted me to reflect on what experiences shaped my intellectual and emotional relationship to my physical self. There are no simple remedies to respond to the cultural ways that women's bodies are policed and shamed. Encouragingly, there are educators and wellness practitioners exploring the topic through educational programs. Examples of interesting curricular and educational work developed to encourage healthy body image, particularly for young women and girls, include the True Body Project and Red Clay's Yoga, Literature, & Art Camp. Incorporating the use of movement, mindfulness practices, creativity, and storytelling participants' gain skills towered "shame resilience" (Brown, 2006; Roberts, 2018, True Body Project, 2017).

The True Body Project is a program that serves Cincinnati Public Schools and provides community workshops for adults and survivors of human trafficking in Cambodia. The program operates a curriculum guided by the "True Body Constitution" which reads in part:

We believe in the ability to heal ourselves through mind, body, and spirit...

We believe in defining ourselves, not letting others define us....

We believe our bodies are vessels and a vital part of who we are.

We believe in the history and lives of our bodies...

We believe in the power of bonding together to inspire, grow, and heal...

We believe in the direct connection between mind and body.

(True Body Project, 2017)

Participants in the program are led through a series of meditative, movement, and journaling practices designed to address trauma hidden within the body and engage deeper connection to personal healing. An 18 year old participant shared of her experience in the program that:

Young women today grow up in a world with two faces. One tells us how to live and learn with open hearts—we can be anybody and do anything. Another face tells us that we are not pretty enough, stylish enough, sexy enough to be worthy of notice. True Body is about identifying and overcoming the psychological

obstacles of this dual world to hear our voices above this confusing roar. And in the True Body experience, I believe we are beginning to truly listen to our hearts. (True Body Project, 2017)

Another great example is Red Clay's Yoga, Literature, and Art Camp developed by Dr. Chelsea Jackson Roberts at Spellman College. This program is particularly geared toward black girls and incorporates art, poetry, writing, photography, and yoga. Over the course of a two-week long camp experience, participants explore the works of Nikki Giovanni, Audre Lorde, Maya Angelou, Janelle Monet, and more (Roberts, 2018).

### **ENCULTURATING BODY POSITIVITY CURRICULAR POSSIBILITIES THROUGH CURRERE**

More educational programs and curricula that are specifically designed for women and girls to develop a healthy body image are needed. It is my desire as a creative educator to build on this work and use *currere* in the design of curricular tools that will allow space for creating collective counter-narratives, the development of shame resilience, and the fostering of body positivity. There is possibility in these spaces to generate resistance to dominate cultural expectations placed on people who inhabit female bodies. Resistance in the form of counter-storytelling is a way of responding to dominant cultural narratives (Baszile, 2015). The process of engaging storytelling and counter-narrative creates opportunities for young women and girls to develop their voices and wellness practices that may allow them to inhabit their own bodies on their own terms.

My experiences of growing up with harmful body shaming labels inspires me to write about the issue. Storytelling and counter-narrative are a means of resistance to domination. This work is a beginning exploration of the *currere* regressive structure (autobiographical analysis) toward developing curricula specifically for women and girls to tell the story of their bodies. This is, of course, a personal journey for everyone and requires deep excavation of personal wounds perpetuated by outside forces. Using the *currere* process, I developed questions that might help to unearth those wounds so that healing might begin (Pinar, 1994).

#### Potential Questions:

1. Tell me a little bit about your relationship with and to your body in general (good, bad, or otherwise).
2. What has been most influential in shaping the relationship to your body up to this point?
3. What do you love most about your body?
4. What is the most amazing thing your body has ever done for you?

### **CLOSING THOUGHTS**

The ongoing inner battle between women and their bodies is perpetuated by societal beliefs that are thrust upon us from the patriarchal, male gaze. The constant barrage of negative media imagery reinforces a harmful self-image for women and girls. My passion for this subject matter is deeply personal. Starting with my size, it allowed me to question all of the ways in which my body has been policed and to start the process of personally unravelling those assumptions. The work of developing curricular and co-curricular tools using *currere* as a means of counter-storytelling

might be helpful for those on their own journeys of body acceptance, self-love, and personal freedom and might allow more of us, particularly women and girls (but not limited to those who identify in those terms), to be educated in intersectional, feminist resistance for building resilience to dominant cultural narratives and to shape our own stories.

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