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## CRITICAL RACE/FEMINIST CURRERE

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If we understand education as a journey toward self-understanding, then the critical and reoccurring question (perhaps in different forms) is who am I? The question can be answered in a superficial sense by stating one's name, race, gender, religion, parentage, and then some. But to be consciously and willfully on a journey toward self-understanding would require that the question be engaged through deep and ongoing contemplation, the kind proposed by the method of currere (Pinar, 2004). In the field of curriculum theory, currere is often engaged as a way to think specifically about one's own educational experience in the context of the historical, social, political, and cultural realities that give it meaning. It helps one explore how the academic subjects help in understanding one's life and how life experiences help one understand academic knowledge (Pinar, 2004). To do currere is to move through and among four moments of critical self-reflection and internal dialogue. In short, currere asks that one (1) remember and reflect on her/his past educational experiences, (2) contemplate desires and fantasies of the future, (3) consider the impact of both the past and future on the shape of the present, and (4) synthesize thinking across these moments as a way to purposefully engage one's learning in the present.

But what if, in the process of this complicated conversation within herself, the woman of color realizes her own absence; that is, her conversation is taking shape around ideas, concepts, and texts that emerge

primarily from the male psyche, from the White psyche, from the White male psyche. How is her self-understanding and thus her sense of agency impacted when she cannot see herself or can only see herself through the eyes of her others?

Critical race/feminist currere is an autobiographical exploration guided by the question: Who am I as a non-White woman? Thus, it is a kind of currere inspired by the reality of one's absence and a quest to make oneself subject. It seeks to understand how the dynamics of race, gender, class, and other important makers of self and the ways in which they intersect and are inflected in the perpetually evolving question—Who am I? She tries to grapple with that question in part by reading autobiographically; that is to bring a text into the fold of her internal conversation. For instance, when she reads Plato, Charles Darwin, Michel Foucault, or Karl Marx, she asks, Who are you? Where are you? Where am I? Who was I when you were writing? What has not been said? What is lurking in the shadows of your thinking? What other stories are happening alongside your story? How might we work together? Is that possible? To what extent? Or not? In essence, to read autobiographically means to read as if one is a co-producer of knowledge and not simply the consumer of someone else's knowledge. Reading in this way sends her on a journey in search of the answers to these kinds of questions.

In her journeying, she realizes the importance of seeking insight from her co-subjects, from those who

have shared the space of otherness with her. In critical race/feminist currere, the others who are invited into the conversation represent the voice/s that have been absent, ignored, misconstrued, distorted, repressed in the curriculum/s that shapes our lives—the curricula of schooling and media, in particular. What voices have been silenced in and through her educational experiences? What do the thinkers who are women of color say about this idea or that one? To them she might ask: What does it mean to be a person who is non-White and a woman? What kinds of gendered and raced politics, geographies, and cultural canners border your/my “I” giving it definition and deep meaning while also robbing it of its full humanity? How has your/my relationship with the other been constituted? How did you persevere and how might I? How are you healing and how might I heal? What might our futures look like? How might I/we think, speak, and act for justice in my/our own voices? These are but a few of the questions begging for deep and critically conscious self-reflection; they are questions that seek to decolonize one’s mind; that is to “free” oneself from being utterly occupied by male-centered European/American conceptions of “lesser” people.

Critical race/feminist currere is compelled by a desire to both understand and to free oneself from the confines of oppressive ways of knowing and being. The practice of critical race/feminist currere is not committed to a search for universal Truth; it is not invested in feigning neutrality; it is not interested in objectification; it is not wed to hierarchical or binary ways of thinking. It is a process through which women of color, and perhaps other people too, can wrestle with the epistemological dimensions of domination; that is to say that projects of domination (in terms of race, gender, class, sexuality, and more) are most intractable when those who are being dominated cannot think, cannot imagine, cannot be outside of the ways of knowing, being, and doing that have brought about the situation of domination in the first place.

Because currere is essentially a meaning-making process, it is important for the reader to note that the description that follows is one that emerges from my experiences of doing currere as a Black woman in the United States, as such it grapples particularly with blackness and womanness. However, this does not mean that critical race/feminist currere holds no

meaning or possibility for others. There are all kinds of possibilities to consider, and I try diligently to point the reader toward other avenues, alleys, and angles of vision. The reader might want to contemplate, for one, how my experiences frame my understanding, and how her or his experiences might shape her or his understanding in very different ways, and then consider how our different experiences of currere might talk with each other, and how might we co-theorize the possibilities?

### Contemporary Concerns

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How is justice possible in a richly diverse and complex world, if our conceptions of justice are deeply rooted in one group of people’s ways of knowing? How is it possible when those ways of knowing are also deeply implicated in structuring and maintaining oppressive relations of power? How might other people with other ways of knowing contribute to the conversation? How might they intervene on dominant perspectives and offer other conceptions of justice? How is this possible, when those other ways of knowing and being are understood as inferior? How is it possible when she believes the only way to be heard is to speak in the language of power, even when that power is abusive? How is it possible, as a woman or a person of color, to say anything, anything at all that is not mediated by the language of domination and still be heard? How might she enter the conversation in her own voice?

The contemporary concerns are deeply rooted in a long-standing and persistent problem—the dilemma of the colonized mind. Many scholars have long spoken to the psychological chains of colonization, slavery, and imperialism set into motion by European domination that was facilitated not simply by colonization and exploitation of land but essentially sustained through the long-term colonization of educational systems designed to keep the dominated believing in the superiority of European and male ways of knowing and being and the inferiority of others. Some classic reads along these lines include the following: Carter G. Woodson’s *Mis-Education of the Negro*, Harold Cruse’s *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, Gayatri Spivak’s *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera*, and Patricia Hill Collins’s *Black Feminist Thought*. Each

of these authors addressed the complex dynamics of power, knowledge and difference, situating racism/sexism as not simply a problem of resource allocation but more broadly as a problem of knowledge production, circulation, and validation.

Without question, all of these scholars explicitly or implicitly locate the problem in education, or more specifically how European or Western (to include the United States) ways of knowing the world inform and often restrict what and how we can know. While these scholars and others offer new ways of thinking about the dilemma in contemporary contexts where slavery and formal colonization, for example, no longer exist but linger in legacies of knowledge, critical race/feminist currere is interested in speaking to how one might undergo the process of decolonizing one's mind, or delinking from dominant perspectives and their reinforcement of race and gender hierarchies. Once the woman of color recognizes that this is in fact a problem, and that she too is in its grip, that she too has been convinced that she is not as good as, as smart as, as worthy as her male and/or White peers, how shall she proceed?

## Context

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Imagine this: In a course about great American intellectuals, there is one man of color and no women of color out of the 20 intellectuals considered. What are the women of color in the course to think? What are they to conclude about the intellectual capacities of women of color? What are they to make of the fact that others failed to notice the absence? When a woman of color tries to write the experiences and struggles of like women into the curriculum through her choice of paper topics and extra reading, she is required to validate her argument with the work of the most important scholars, the White scholars, the male scholars, the White male scholars. Does she just chalk her silencing up to necessary academic ritual? What does she become when she can only speak in the language of her other, the language that has been instrumental in her own oppression? When she tries to articulate herself at the intersections of race and gender, she does not quite fit the male-dominated perspectives on racial struggle, nor does she quite fit neatly into the White middle-class feminist perspectives. What should she do? Submerge herself in one

or the other? Or carve out a space where she can speak to both from the experience of having a personal stake in eradicating sexism *and* racism? What ideas, images, stereotypes belie her dilemma?

How do perpetually negative stereotypes of Blacks, Latinos/as, Asians, Native Americans, and women impact the psyches of girls and women of color? How do they impact the psyches of others? How do they facilitate and reinforce race and gender hierarchies? And how do those race and gender hierarchies lead to invisibility, silencing, and disregard? How do they arrest her sense of agency and potentially usurp her contributions to the project of justice for all?

Thinking critically about the reproduction of stereotypes is one way to begin the journey toward understanding how racism, sexism, and other relations of power are maintained largely by convincing people to *know* themselves as "othered," as inferior to some other group or groups of people. In a society where we have been led to believe that blackness and womanness are not only decidedly less than but also the very opposite of whiteness and maleness, all people are deeply entangled in "spirit murder," albeit to varying degrees and enacted in different ways. Spirit murder is the ongoing series of racist and/or sexist injuries (and other kinds of disregard) spurred by the constant and even violent disregard for one's humanity, blocking the self from fully seeing itself (Williams, 1991). Negative images and ideas of blackness as dirty, lazy, uncivilized, irrational, criminal, anti-intellectual, and/or intellectually inferior have existed globally in various forms since before U.S. slavery and have continued into the present day in increasingly more subtle, but no less damaging, terms. Likewise, there are also gender stereotypes that depict women as overly emotional and not capable or not as capable as men physically, intellectually, and otherwise. The stereotypes that impact women of color often reflect an intermingling of the two, as racial stereotypes have historically been used to bolster gender stereotypes and vice versa (Harris-Perry, 2011; White, 2001).

Some of the images that have historically disfigured, for example, Black women in the American imagination include: the docile, overweight mammy who happily serves the needs of everyone but herself; the licentious jezebel who "asks" for whatever sexual mistreatment she might encounter; the angry

Black woman who emasculates Black men; and the tragic mulatto who is the confused offspring of interracial relations. Although these images are historical, several scholars have studied how they have been rearticulated in contemporary culture (i.e., welfare queen, video vixen, and the angry Black bitch) and continue to circulate through cultural discourses that affect a wide range of social, economic, and political realities for Black women and other women of color, including health care, social services, employment, and education (Browne, 1999; Hill Collins, 2004).

If these are the common and widely circulated images in a society where there are few if any positive or complex images of Black women in school curricula or media, what do we learn to think of her and what does she learn to think of herself? Can she think? Does she think? What does she think? How do the stereotypes of Latina, Asian, or Native women circulate in the public sphere, and what should we make of her absence in school curricula?

## Theory

Critical race/feminist currere emerges at the intersections of three theoretical traditions: curriculum theory, critical race theory, and Black feminist theory. Curriculum theory is, in short, the study of educational experience and thus not only offers the opportunity for one to contemplate her experiences but also values self-understanding as a critical social justice project in and of itself. There are two major works in curriculum theory that are foundational for critical race/feminist currere. In *What Is Curriculum Theory?* Pinar (2004) reintroduced currere and speaks to its significance by arguing that it is not really possible to engage in a politics of justice without working to democratize oneself. While critics of curriculum theory might suggest that such strategy for living life democratically is too self-absorbed, others might just note that the only access the self has to understanding and advocating for and/or with others is through the self, and an unexamined self is a potentially dangerous self, as it inflicts harm with no realization of that fact. Importantly, Pinar also pointed out that this process of self-actualization is not simply a private self-focused affair, but rather “an ongoing project of self-understanding in which one becomes mobilized for engaged pedagogical action—as private-and-public

intellectual—with others in the social reconstruction of the public sphere” (2004, p. 37). Although currere is conceptualized as an autobiographical method open to everyone, certainly how one engages the process of currere is likely to vary depending on one’s sociocultural context and one’s position in the relations of power that govern our world (i.e., race, gender, class, sexuality) and thus also in the knower/known relationship.

To this point, Susan Edgerton (1996) in *Translating the Curriculum* introduced currere of marginality, as she tries to capture the complexity of what it means to know from the perspective of a person who is part of a historically marginalized group. Edgerton surmises that knowing from the margins is inextricably linked to but distinct from knowing from the privileged space of the center. Those who dwell on the margins must know the cultural and social context of the center in a way that those who dwell at the center are not expected to know the context of the margins. To know from the margins is to confront a persistent double-bind, which reflects both the need to say something about who you are and what you mean and to simultaneously challenge the center’s attempts to define you: “I am this,” “Don’t label me as this” (Edgerton, 1996, pp. 48–49).

To better illuminate the significance of Edgerton’s point, consider, for instance, the nature of this dilemma in Patricia Hill Collins’s (1990) *Black Feminist Thought*. In this groundbreaking work, Hill Collins delved into the complexities of power, knowledge, and difference in her attempt to say something about how Black women’s ways of knowing are different than those ways of knowing considered legitimate in the mainstream. Yet in her effort to define Black women’s ways of knowing as distinct, she confronted the challenge of not essentializing the experiences of all Black women. In essence she needs to say something important about how the experiences of Black women matter and differ, but she must do so without assuming that all Black women’s experiences are the same. For some readers, she failed to do so and was aptly criticized for not considering the diversity of experiences among Black women and for reinforcing oppressive ideas while challenging them. For others, the significance of her work was in her ability to map other ways of knowing that, for the most part, were outside of and often in contestation with mainstream ways of

knowing. And still for others her dilemma was constituted more by the fact that she tried to capture a different reality in a language—rational argument—that can only be presented in and thus read as mapping essentialist notions. In any case, Hill Collins found herself in the inescapable double-bind noted by Edgerton (1996). Critical race/feminist currere is interested in the race/gender dynamics of this perpetual double-bind and as such adds to the currere of marginality by drawing on critical race and Black feminist theories (see Baszile, 2009, for an initial attempt at conceptualizing a critical race/gendered currere).

Critical race theory is concerned with interrogating and reconstructing the relationship among race, knowledge, and the law. At least it emerged in the 1980s within and as a concern with race and legal rationality. As it has migrated into and through other disciplines, it does not always stay true to its legal roots. Some scholars find this disturbing, not in the spirit of true critical race theory. Others might suggest that while it seems prudent to acknowledge the legal roots of critical race theory, it also seems that the spirit of critical race theory—as an interrogation of the relationships among race, knowledge, and power—need not be shackled to law, but must also recognize the power of culture to not only determine the law but also decide if, when, and how it chooses to represent and abide by the law, literally or in the spirit of.

To this end, critical race/feminist currere is most interested in looking at the relations among race, knowledge, power, and the self. A scholar in this vein might ask, how are these relations reproduced through a number of interlocking rationalities—legal, scientific, neoliberal, technological—that circulate in U.S./world culture/s and work to discipline our thinking and our behavior in racist, sexist, heterosexist, ableist, and other oppressive and undemocratic ways? In other words how do these rationalities—despite the worthy things achieved within their logics—work to make invisible, to silence, to create the conditions for disregard? There are a number of ideas and concepts generated or revived by critical race theory that are useful, if not crucial, to both the theorizing and the practice of critical race/feminist currere.

Critical race scholars embrace the centrality of race as a powerful and organizing social construct in

our society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). They have interrogated and situated the concept of white property as the means by which citizenship has been conferred, respected, and enacted (Harris, 1993). They have encouraged us to look at the enduring racial patterns that continue to define what it means to live in the United States as marginalized people (Bell, 2005). They have embraced and reinvigorated the tradition of counterstorytelling, naming and thus validating the importance of the experiential knowledge of people of color (Delgado, 1989). Critical race feminist scholars, in particular, have given us the concept of intersectionality, or thinking about how race, gender, and other markers of difference work in coinciding and contradictory ways to shape our realities (Crenshaw, 1989). Without these insights, without a radical shaking up of her habits of mind about race and racism, without the opportunity to explore race—blackness in particular—within a complicated conversation significantly inhabited by the Black/non-White psyche, a woman of color in search of self-understanding is likely to be utterly unable to see herself beyond the racist or raceless rhetoric that denies her a voice, a self not completely occupied by the other.

Likewise Black feminist insight and testimonies are also foundational to any search for self-understanding among Black women and other women of color, as they offer not only examples of critical race/feminist currere but also important ideas, strategies, and concepts that illuminate the importance of making ourselves radical subjects, committed to anti-oppressive struggles. Critical race/feminist currere is first and foremost the cultivation of what bell hooks (1992) has called radical Black female subjectivity. Although Black women are disadvantaged by living in a society structured by racist, sexist, and other hierarchies of oppression, this does not have to damn them to a life of pain and arrested development. It could or should instead encourage them to willfully challenge the ways in which racist, sexist, and other oppressive dynamics work to silence and make invisible those who live life at the bottom of oppressive hierarchies. To do so however, it is necessary for them first to realize their own invisibility and then to embark on the journey toward making themselves subject and investing themselves in collective struggles against racist, sexist, and other forms of domination (hooks, 1992). Importantly, cultivating a radical

Black female subjectivity requires an engagement not only in collective struggle but also with the work and life stories of radicalized Black women (hooks, 1992). The testimonies of radicalized Black women are essential for the wisdom and affirmation they offer those who are cultivating, or are interested in cultivating, a radical subjectivity; it is in dialogue with these voices especially that the becoming radical Black female subject is prepared, fortified, inspired, and encouraged to stand publicly for justice. How might other feminists of color contribute to the internal dialogue? What might *currere* look like when it is nurtured by Chicana feminisms or African feminisms or queer theory or theories of Black masculinity?

We cannot be actively engaged in a process of self-actualization without asking from when, where, who, and how we became. This is the point of *currere*'s regressive moment, to remember the people, events, and moments of our educational lives that have marked our becoming in significant ways. Part of this process is about recalling the reachable past (childhood). The other part of the process is about trying to imagine the significance of the unreachable, but ever present past. Cynthia Dillard's (2012) recent work on (re)membering is helpful for theorizing the nature and the significance of the past in terms of critical race/feminist *currere*. (Re)membering, according to Dillard, is the act of not only recalling the past but also putting it back together. Engaging *currere*, from a critical race/feminist standpoint, requires not only (re)membering the childhood that has made one who she is, but also (re)membering the collective past that she has been taught, warned, and seduced to forget. How did I come to understand myself as a woman, as a Black person? Black? I am not in fact the color of black night or crayons or tar, where did that notion come from? West Africa, slavery, reconstruction, Jim Crow, and then some. I did not experience these places, laws, and tragedies and yet they help to define me. How is this so? And why does it matter? Who can help me (re)member? And what good will remembering do anyway? Re-searching and (re)membering in this way changes our ways of being and knowing; (re)membering in this sense is an act of decolonization (Dillard, 2012).

Jennifer Nash's (2013) conceptualization of Black feminist love-politics is also helpful for understanding the process and importance of *currere* for Black

and other women of color interested in cultivating a radical subjectivity. Drawing on the work of Alice Walker (1983), Audre Lorde (1984), and June Jordan (2002), Nash spoke to how the work of these Black feminists has situated love as a radical theory/practice of social justice. Black feminist love-politics, surmised Nash, emerges out of the practice of coming to know oneself in the context of the communities that help define self (I/We), learning to love oneself because of and in spite of the trauma that comes with living in a racist/sexist society, and challenging oneself to confront and embrace difference—all as a way to envision and work for a more just world. In other words, how might a Black woman, through a radical politics of love, contribute to reconstructing the public sphere? Critical race/feminist *currere* is one way to begin the difficult work of self-love, loving others, and loving the world enough to commit oneself to working for better futures.

Although Black feminist theory contributes in significant ways to understanding critical race/feminist *currere*, it is certainly not the only body of feminist work that can or should make meaning of *currere* for Black and other women of color. How might the theorizing of Gloria Anzaldúa, Chela Sandoval, Chandra Mohanty, Trihn T. Minha, and Sylvia Wynters, among others, contribute to one's internal dialogue, to one's move toward radical non-White/nonwestern female subjectivity? Indeed what other voices, what other theoretical orientations might compel one to enter into the collective struggle for justice through a deep and contemplative ongoing conversation with oneself? The voices don't have to always agree. What they should do, however, is provoke the questions: Who am I? Where do I stand? What am I struggling for?—and they should encourage searching for, reflecting on, and living with the always-evolving answers.

### Forms of Inquiry and Modes of Expression

It should go almost without saying that critical race/feminist *currere* is itself a form of inquiry; it is inquiring about the self and its position in the world and its relation to justice. It is, in short, an autobiographical exploration grounded in the method of *currere*, which seeks above all else to begin the work

of decolonizing the mind. While it shares an emphasis on the self with other modes of inquiry, such as self-study, teacher research, action research, autoethnography, and the like, critical race/feminist currere is not intended to be a “research” project in the traditional sense. It is an ongoing practice of individual well-being (self-actualization) and how it might contribute to the project of collective well-being (justice for all). Practicing a critical race/feminist currere, then, is like doing yoga, tai chi, or one’s hair; one must always be engaged in it to see the promise of it.

Critical race/feminist currere could also illuminate and be illuminated by other modes of inquiry that in fact work to hide the self, like quantitative research, some forms of qualitative research, and some forms of conceptual analysis—in short, all forms of work that claim an objective perspective. For example, although we all bring biases into our research, in many instances we are not “allowed” to acknowledge or explore those biases and the impact they may have on the doing and reporting of the research. However, she who is engaged in currere is likely to take up these tensions in her internal dialogue, working through them and deciding what she will do with or about them.

Moreover, it is important to note that currere is not necessarily the work of writing autobiography; that is to say that it does not have to result in the stories of one’s life written or spoken for a public. The hope is that it does bring about self-transformation and as such it will shape one’s public work toward justice. Many women and men of color, however, have

shared quite explicitly the ways in which their educational experiences inspire and influence their theorizing. Some excellent examples include the autobiographical writings of W. E. B. DuBois, Malcolm X, Angela Davis, Nina Simone, Ida B. Wells, Gloria Anzaldúa, Grace Lee Boggs, Russell Means, Derrick Bell, and Patricia Williams, among others. In fact, locating knowledge production in and through the body is indicative of Black feminist theory, critical race theory, and several other approaches to knowing that challenge the dominate European-centered conception of knowing as a relationship between subject and object, rather than one between and among subjects located in places, times, and bodies. Sharing one’s experiences or giving testimony was at one time the main mode of education for many groups of people who were denied schooling. Critical race/feminist currere works to “(re)member” (Dillard, 2012) and to continue the practice of educating through testimony—sometimes as an entrée into theory, sometimes as theory, and sometimes as an interrogation of theory (see Baszile, 2009, 2011).

Lastly, because writing/language—perhaps more than anything else—requires us to struggle with and through the language of our own oppression and as such blocks as much as it reveals, critical race/feminist currere encourages creativity. How might photographs, music, soul writing, dancing, listening, relocating your desk or your whole life help you decolonize your thinking and being? If we stay true to those ways of knowing and expressing deemed legitimate, how can we be free enough to intervene on the language of our own oppression?

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