Seeking Race: Finding Racism

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Abstract:

This article explores the somatic lessons that I have learned about race and racism from participating in schooling. Using arts-based research inquiry methods of storytelling, dance and poetry, I allowed my somatic knowledge of race to surface. In analyzing this emergent knowledge, I examined how the null curriculum in schools has influenced my own understandings of both race and racism. Here, I question how maintaining the status quo in school is perpetuating fractured self identities in students, as well as a social fractal of repeated racism in society. This article explores the interconnections between race and racism and the impact of erasure on student identity. By delving into and sharing my own personal experiences of race in school, this article aims to provoke educators to consider the impact of the choices made around diversity in schools.

Keywords: race; racism; curriculum; schooling; hidden curriculum; null curriculum; arts-based research

The Null Curriculum of Race

Disturbed by the growing number of publicly accepted acts of racism presented on television and websites today and the growing divide between the socially constructed categories of race, I was provoked to question the role that schooling has on teaching about race. As a mixed-race woman, I "live in the hyphen" (Wah, 1996, p. 53). I dwell in the space between Caribbean-Canadian, Black-White (Duchscher, 2011). Lately, I sense the in-between space widening. Willinsky (1998) wrote: "We are schooled in differences great and small, in borderlines and boundaries, in historical struggles and exotic practices, all of which extend the meaning of difference" (p. 1). How have I been schooled in differences that shape my own understanding of race, my own racial self-definition? Growing up as a brown-skinned child in a Caucasian family, community and school, what were my racial curriculum encounters in school? What did I learn about race, in school? What will my children learn about race?

As an arts-based researcher, I set out to answer this question by exploring my own somatic knowledge through the arts-based inquiry practices of story-telling, dance and poetry. I explored my personal experiences in schooling, focusing in on memories that relate to race or skin colour. I then danced the concepts that emerged and reflected on the lessons I have learned through poetry. Surprising even myself, I discovered that the lessons were more about racism than race and that the two are inseparable. I discovered that my racial identity and the lessons about race do not dwell in the hidden curriculum, but rather they are nullified, non-existent. However, a curriculum of racism became clear. This paper invites the reader to experience the impact the null curriculum of race has on students of colour.

Aletheia: Seeing the Fractal through Eric Garner

Moules, McCaffery, Field, and Lang (2015) explain that there are moments of *aletheia* in our lives; moments of truth where what was once concealed is suddenly revealed. They explain that "aletheia first occurs when we are addressed, when something opens which was once closed, when we become aware of something that was not there as being there" (Moules, et al., 2015, p. 76). My moment of aletheia was watching the murder of Eric Garner. Eric Garner was an African-American unarmed man who was tackled in broad daylight, on the street, by four police officers—one of whom held Mr. Garner in a chokehold until he suffocated. The video of his death was publicly broadcast across North America. His last words were, "I can't breathe." His death challenged me to question what I have learned, what my children are learning, and how the world will be different going forward. How will it, can it, be anything but a repetition of the past?

Fractals

I was on the treadmill
When I watched Eric Garner die.
The gym was filled with people.
We all kept doing what we were doing,

While the video of a man dying,
Four men pressing his life out with their uniformed knees,
Choking the life out of his black body,
Looped
Over
And
Over
And
Over
And no one stopped what they were doing.
No one seemed shocked or upset.
The video kept looping,
The track on the treadmill kept going,
I kept taking steps to nowhere,
Walking and walking
forward,
ending up in the same place I started.

Each step looped images and videos
In my mind,
Trayvon Martin.
Rodney King.
Martin Luther King, Jr.
Four little girls.
Unnamed bodies hanging from trees.
Suffocated bodies packed in on boats.
Each step forward on the cyclical track
Looped back in time.
Step after step
In the name of progress,[1]
Getting nowhere,
Repeating the same actions, the same beliefs.
A mathematical fractal,
"a never-ending pattern . . .
infinitely complex patterns
that are self-similar across different scales,
created by repeating a simple process
over and over

[1] Wright (2004).

in an ongoing feedback loop."[2]

We don't need to loop.
The treadmill has a big red STOP button
In case you fall or can't keep up,
In case you "can't breathe".[3]
But we choose to stay in the loop.

We send kids to school to learn.
Our schools teach them,
The report card says,
"Citizenship,
Personal Development,
Character".[4]
Yet, we seem to end up in the same place we started.
Looping.
Every generation of students
Learning to loop.
Every generation of teachers
Teaching in the loop.
Fractals,
Unaware of the looping track,
Teaching "infinitely complex patterns,
Repeating simple processes
Over and over
In an ongoing feedback loop".[5]

The video keeps looping,
The track on the treadmill
Keeps going,
Taking steps to nowhere,
Ending up in the same place we started,
When I watched Eric Garner die.
I was on the treadmill.
InanongoingfeedbackloopInanon

[2] Fractal Foundation (2013).
[3] New York Daily News (2015). (Note: explicit, violent footage.)
[4] "Citizenship, Personal Development, Character" was an assessment item on the 2016 report card template of the Calgary Board of Education (personal communication).
[5] Fractal Foundation (2013).

goingfeedbackloopInanongoingfeedback
loopInanongoingfeedba . . .

Seeking Race

My concerns about this social fractal, the hypnotic "ongoing feedback loop" that may be embedded in education, directed me to examine the hidden curriculum. Eisner (2002) called this the "implicit curriculum". He explained that the way schools are structured and organized all teach their own lessons and these lessons are "among the most important lessons a child learns" (p. 97). I imagined that schools are not overtly teaching racism and division as explicit curriculum outcomes, and yet these issues are still prevalent in our society. I questioned if lessons about race dwell in the hidden curriculum. In writing about the hidden curriculum of schools, Apple and King (1983) noted that

> the study of the relationship between ideology and school knowledge is especially important for understanding the larger social collectivity of which we are all a part. It enables us to begin to see how a society reproduces itself, how it perpetuates its conditions of existence through the selection and transmission of certain kinds of cultural capital upon which a complex yet unequal industrial society depends and how it maintains cohesion among its classes and individuals by propagating ideologies that ultimately sanction existing institutional arrangements that can cause unnecessary stratification and inequality in the first place. (p. 97)

This passage reminds me that school, like a jewel in Indra's Net, is both a reflection of our society and is reflected out into our society (Loy, 1993). Thus, the materials and methods that we use in schooling children are reflected out into society as the students carry lessons from schooling out into the world. What are students learning about race and subsequently about the world?

These questions caused me to question myself. As a teacher, I never consciously taught students to feel divided, or did I? I must admit that I engaged my students in taken-for-granted rituals of schooling that I did not examine or consider as part of the curriculum they were learning. I now see that these schooling rituals (McLaren, 1986; Bell, 1992) have the potential to both transform students (Turner, 1969) and maintain social status quo (Durkheim, 1985). As Quantz (1999) explained, "The key to understanding ritual lies in the noncognitive effects of participation rather than in the cognitive meanings per se of the symbols around which rituals are performed" (p. 497). We need to look deeply into the noncognitive effects of schooling on our understandings of race.

Omi and Winant (2000) define race as "a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies" (p. 183). I looked for my own answers to these questions about race, identity and school lessons by accessing the noncognitive effects of my embodied knowledge. Understanding race is understanding my lived bodily experience and "I can only understand the function of the living body by accomplishing it and to the extent that I am a body that rises up toward the world" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, p. 147). I set out to find not only race in the "curriculum-as-plan", but race in the "curriculum-as lived experience" (Aoki, 2005). I used bi-lateral tapping (Parnell, 2008) to tap into my tactile memories of race and identity at school. I

documented the stories that emerged. I danced the concepts from the stories to understand the somatic lessons that I have learned about race, and about my own identity in school. I reflected on how dancing the concepts felt in my body and allowed my understandings of race to emerge in poetry. I looked for school lessons of race through this looping artistic process.

Dwelling in Race

Remembering Race

Grade 4: Modeling

Mr. Dyth was my favorite teacher. He had caramel skin and kind eyes. That year, for the first time, I got straight A's. I felt smart and loved and beautiful in his class. One day, Mr. Dyth taught us to draw figures. He asked for a model and I was the first to put up my hand. I sat on a stool at the front of the class looking out as my classmates busily sketched pictures of me. I felt so much pride being the model, the center of attention, the beautiful one. I imagined the beautiful pictures that I would see when the artists were done. I imagined seeing my beauty reflected back to me through my classmates' eyes. When they were finally done, they shared their pictures. Staring back at me were not the beautiful drawings of the model I imagined myself to be, but crude stick figures each with a mess of scribbled afros atop each head. I felt my face get hot and red. I felt embarrassed and ashamed that my classmates didn't see me the way I thought they did. It was one of the first times that I remember feeling ugly.

Grade 4: Snot Face

That boy would sneak up on me and whisper hatred into my ear. I could feel it hot and sharp. He would just appear beside me and whisper, *"half breed".* I didn't know what that meant. I knew that it was mean and he was trying to hurt me. I could feel his intent on my skin. He did it every day; always when I least expected it. He always caught me off guard and then he would disappear through the crowd, out the door and I was left feeling the burn of his words on my skin. Finally, one day, I had enough. I followed him through the crowd, right to the front door of the school, the door right across from the front office. I threw open the door and yelled with all my might, "You Snot Faced, Snot Sucker!!!" Mr. Dyth came out of the office. My face was red, first from yelling, and now from being caught yelling. He admonished me for such terrible language. I got in trouble, but I don't remember hearing from that boy again.

Grade 8: Mulatto

In grade eight, the Harlem Globe Trotters performed at our school. It was the first time that I had seen a large group of tall, handsome, Black[6] men in our town. I remember sitting in the front row of the bleachers, watching the show when one of the players came right up to me and said, "Are you

[6] I have intentionally capitalized "Black" when I use the word to refer to, not only a colour, but the cultural group of people who identify as part of the African diaspora. I am also using this capitalization as a provocative tool as I challenge the reader to center Blackness and confront the nullification of Blackness in schools.

mulatto?" I had no idea what that meant. He clarified, "You know, are you mulatto, mixed, Black and White?" I shrugged, responding, "I don't know, I guess so." He looked confused, "What do you mean you don't know, you either are or you aren't." And so, I said, "Yes, yes I am." It was the first time that someone had given me a word to describe myself and my colour, my race and my difference, and I realized then that I was connected to a whole group of people other than the ones in this homogeneous town.

Third Year University: The Color Purple

I was in school for sixteen years before there were Black female authors on a class reading list. Searching through the university calendar, I was surprised and excited when I read the name of the class I didn't even imagine existing—African American Women's Literature. My own experience with African American literature in school was limited. I'd only really read Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Martin Luther King Jr.'s *I Have a Dream* speech and only when we got to choose our own readings. I didn't even know there were so many Black female authors that there could be a whole class! Growing up in a small, racially homogeneous Caucasian town, I was never part of a Black community. I was thrilled to walk into the classroom and see so many black faces. The Black girls all sat at the back. The white girls all sat in the front. I, as a mixed-race cliché, took my spot in the middle. Then the teacher walked in. She was white. You could feel the back of the room tense and the front of the room relax a little. Each day a group of Black women would saunter into class a tiny bit late, challenging the teacher. It was clear that the women of colour did not yet trust her with these African American stories. I did not see myself in either group and gave her a chance, and so I soon became the teacher's pet, often called upon to read out loud and answer questions. I see now that my light skin and open face invited this role and in taking it on, I alienated myself even more. Each week the class became more and more tense and hostile, until finally, three quarters of the way through the semester, one student from the back shouted out, "I don't even know why we are reading Carson McCullers! She's not even Black! This is supposed to be African American Women's Literature!" The class froze. I didn't know that she was white. In this time before Google and Wikipedia, I didn't know what the authors looked like. Some of the literature seemed confusing, and I struggled to figure out what the characters looked like, but I always assumed they were all Black. The teacher was shocked and she replied, "No, this class is called Women's Literature from the South." She didn't realize that the office had made a mistake in the title. She was upset and the class continued to be furious. She tried to save things by saying, "Well, why don't we read *The Color Purple*?"

The Alberta Curriculum: Optional

Pulling up the Alberta Program of Studies for Social Studies, I looked to see what my children were mandated to learn about Africa or Black History. Clicking "find on this page", I searched and got:

- Africa – "0 of 0 responses"
- Caribbean – "0 of 0 responses"

- Slavery – "0 of 0 responses"
- Egypt – "0 of 0 responses"
- Black – "1 response" (Grade 5: What do stories of the Underground Railroad tell us about the history and presence of Black communities in Canada?)

It then occurred to me that my children were now in grades 6 and 8 and I don't remember them learning about the Underground Railroad or Black communities at all. I asked them. They said they did learn about it, at home, from me. I guess that part of the curriculum was optional. Their teachers had opted out.

Dancing Race

In considering how to dance my school stories of race, I was drawn to the song "Running" by Gil Scott-Heron (2010). I played this song on a repetitive loop and began the movement by literally running, on the spot, until I could no longer run. I found myself feeling both exhausted and confused as I realized that I was not sure if I was running away from something or running toward something. I questioned if there was anything to run towards. I danced to the song a second time and attempted to recreate my own loop, the missing loop, of Black History.

Writing Race

Race.
I looked for race,
I found myself,
Racing
Away from a vacuum,
Racing towards identity
A race started by the one with the whistle, the gun, the flag,
They built the racing track up around us,
And told us we had to run,
So we've been running,
And running,
And running.
I'm exhausted.
Tired of racing towards an imaginary finish line that holds no prize for me,
Imaginary racing,
Because we are still in the same spot,
Racing to find ourselves,
To love ourselves,
To value ourselves.
On your mark,
Get Set,

Go.

I just wanted to be seen.
Being seen would somehow validate my existence,
My beauty,
My belonging in the world.
I am here.

I looked for myself in the Alberta school curriculum,
I looked for my ancestors in the Program of Studies,
I don't exist,
My search produced "no matches", "zero results"
My ancestors didn't make the cut
When they decided what and who were important
What and who should be remembered
Whose stories should be told.
There are no mixed melanin rich stories in my history books,
No curly hairoines,
No reference to Africa or the Caribbean at all.
Null.
How can we expect Black Lives to Matter
When Black lives are matter-less in our curriculum?

I thought this curriculum was hidden, but I now see it is null[7].
"Null.

1. Without value, effect, consequence, or significance.
2. Being or amounting to nothing; nil; lacking; nonexistent.
3. Empty
4. Being or amounting to zero."[8]

What is the Importance of Zero?
"The question has perplexed those who studied and developed,
How can nothing, as symbolized by zero, be something?
Indian Aryabhata called "kha" a place holder,
Brahmagupta included zero as an actual number,
Al-khwarizmi and Fibonacci expanded the use.
How important is zero?
It is the number around which
Negative numbers to its left stretch into infinity and

[7] Eisner (2002).
[8] Null (n.d.).

Positive numbers to the right do likewise.
Neither positive nor negative
Zero is a pivotal point
The origin point.
Zero is so important that the operations have special rules governing its use.
Whenever zero is added the sum will be whole
Whenever zero is subtracted the difference will be whole
Whenever a whole is subtracted the difference will be
zero.
If zero is divided the quotient will be
zero.
That is why mathematicians have a special term for x over zero-
Infinity
Whether you call it zero, naught or nil,
Zero has an important place in the field".[9]

The curriculum says my people's stories are null,
Zero, naught or nil,
But we were there.
We were there the way the balloon gets the credit not the air.
Our stories exist in the negative space in the paintings of their history,
In the silent moments in the songs of their history,
In the stillness in the dance of their history,
Shaping it, molding it, an important part,
Whether we are acknowledged or not.
My people's stories have been nullified,
But we are here.

Reflecting on Race: Finding Racism

In dancing the concepts that emerged in the stories, I found myself attempting to create my own feedback loop. A loop of my own Black history that reversed backwards in time from the top rock of breakdancing, through the locking of funk, the sugars of jazz, into a South African boot dance, ending with a flourish of Guinea dance. The first loop was punctuated by images of victimization—lynchings and whippings; the second loop punctuated by images of struggle—Black power fists and fighting stances. These images encompassed the Black history that is offered to me. My people are either framed by struggle or oppression. This left me thirsty for the beauty that is Black culture, Black people and Black history. I ended the dance with a final loop embedded with celebration. However, in dancing these concepts and these loops, I was left wondering about the minimal amount of Black history that is presented in the curriculum. How are schools teaching my

[9] Actforlibraries.org (2017). This section of the poem is *found poetry*, shaped from the website Actforlibraries.org

children about the celebration, the success, the strength of a people who have done more than just survive, but who have shaped and moulded the world as we know it today? In schools, where do they share my people's complex and beautiful history—a history framed by wonder, discovery, joy, community and love?

I looked into my somatic knowledge of schooling to find race, to understand what I have learned about race, my own racial identity, and race as a concept. I found that I have only learned of one race in school. I have learned of white history, white authors, white scientists, white musicians and artists. However, when looking for my Black history, I found a void. A void that was not actually empty but shaped by racism. For as Eisner (2002) explained in his description of the "null curriculum", "schools have consequences not only by virtue of what they do teach, but also by virtue of what they neglect to teach" (p. 103). When the histories, stories, knowledge and beauty of the Black community is part of the null curriculum, the result is a curriculum of racism—teaching students that Black lives do not matter.

I thought I would find the complexity of complexion. I found myself working through the memories trying to rework them to find something hopeful and positive. I learned that we cannot experience race without racism, for, as Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015) has stated,

> race is the child of racism, not the father. And the process of naming "the people" has never been a matter of genealogy and physiognomy so much as one of hierarchy. Difference in hue and hair is old. But the belief in the pre-eminence of hue and hair, the notion that these factors can correctly organize a society and that they signify deeper attributes, which are indelible—this is the new idea at the heart of these new people who have been brought up hopelessly, tragically, deceitfully, to believe that they are white. (p. 7)

The lack of people of colour on my reading lists, the venomous spittle of racial slurs, the erasure of Black history from the Program of Studies—these acts are purposeful tools that build the hierarchy that perpetuates the racism we feel and see and experience in the world as well. I learned that I cannot understand race without racism because the categories of race were invented as tools of racism. Understandings of race are interconnected with racism because race was born out of a fear of differences. The creation of race provided for some "the illusion of power through the process of inventing an Other" (Morrison, 2017, p. 24).

In tapping into my own embodied knowledge and the lessons I learned about school, I had to confront the racism embedded in not only the school and the students, but the program of studies as well. McIntosh (1992) explained that it is a white privilege to "be sure that [her] children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race" (p. 47); however, in dancing and examining my own experiences in school, I have to see this as more than a white privilege. For in this process, "I saw that what divided me from the world was not anything intrinsic to us but the actual injury done by people intent on naming us, intent on believing that what they have named us matters more than anything we could actually do" (Coates, 2015, p. 120). The erasure of Black history, Black people and Black bodies from the program of studies works as a form of violence and testifies to the erasure of our race. Castenell and Pinar (1993) wrote:

> "We are what we know." We are, however, also what we do not know. If what we know about ourselves—our history, our culture, our national identity—is deformed by absences, denials and incompleteness, then our identity . . . is fractured. This fractured self is also a repressed self; elements of itself are split off and denied. Such a self lacks access both to itself and to the world. (p. 5)

Confronting the absence, denial and incompleteness of Black history in school, and thus my fractured self, I more deeply understand the call of "Black Lives Matter". Etymologically, to "matter" is to be recognized as "substance from which something is made" (Matter, n.d.). In this sense, schools need to acknowledge that Black lives are also the substance of which Canada is made. Matter also traces back to "mater" meaning "origin, source, mother" (Matter, n.d.). In recognizing that Black Lives Matter, we are understanding our own "origin", affording the privilege of learning our own origins, our own source—the mother of our culture, the mother of our place in the world.

After presenting this paper, my stories, my dance, my body and my poetry at the *Provoking Curriculum Encounters: Plurality, Spaces, Intensities and Charges* conference (2017), a young man of colour raised his hand during the post presentation discussion. He shared that he saw himself in my stories, that many of them were his stories too. He asked me, "What would you say to the little girl that you were in those stories? What would you say to the children of colour living those stories now?" Being caught on the spot, I stumbled through an answer about seeking to find and put yourself in the curriculum, if it was not going to do it for you. But it was not a great answer and it has bothered me ever since. I have thought and thought about it. What would I say to my childhood self? What will I say to my own children? What do I say to other mixed girls seeking race but finding racism?

Dear Mixed Girl Seeking Race,
You might "always feel like running,
Not away because there is no such place",[10]
But stop.
You may not find yourself in the program of studies,
You may not find yourself valued in the curriculum,
In the school choices.
And this is not by accident.
They did not forget to include the history
of the rush of African American immigrants to Alberta,
The entire population of Amber Valley[11].
They did not forget to offer literature by
Chimamanda Adichie,
Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Angela Davis,

[10]Scott-Heron (2010).
[11] Storyhive (2017).

Lawrence Hill, Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin,
Octavia Butler, Richard Wright, Maya Angelou,
Langston Hughes, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Cornell West,
Ralph Ellison, Alex Haley, Roxane Gay, Amiri Baraka
Marlene Norbese Philip, Lillian Allen, Dionne Brand . . .
They did not forget to include the history of
the 54 different countries that make up Africa,
They left them out.
Those stories have been "blacked out"
Erased with "white out."
Your stories have been erased,
As a tool to reinforce a single view of the world,
A single story[12].
However,
Even though your stories, your identity, your people
Are matter-less in the school curriculum,
That is not a testament to how little you matter,
But a testament to how much power those stories hold.
Your stories are powerful.
Your people are powerful.
And beautiful,
And smart,
And connected,
And loving,
And loved,
And influential.
Those stories and that power is yours, your inheritance,
But you will have to claim it yourself,
You will have to seek it yourself,
It may not be offered to you,
Because,
Mixed Girl seeking race,
You will not find race,
You will only find its father[13],
In a system that intends to maintain the status quo[14].

[12] Adichie (2009).
[13] Coates (2015).
[14] Gordon (1993).

Epilogue

I wanted to end this article with something hopeful. I know that is the expectation. People of colour are supposed to be hopeful. We are supposed to "still have a dream" (King, 1963). However, I struggle to find that hope, that dream, today. I feel weighed down by the burden of hope without the lift of love. I intend this work to be a call to action rather than a missive of hope. In publicly sharing the sadness and anger that I experienced by exploring this topic, I call on educators to confront the ways that we continue to educate students "in differences great and small, in borderlines and boundaries, in historical struggles and exotic practices, all of which extend the meaning of difference "(Willinsky, 1998, p. 1). I call on educators to stand up, speak out, disrupt the fractal, and make space for the beauty of all of us in our schools, curriculum and world.

Not Hope but a Call to Action

The burden of hope,
Always rests on brown shoulders,
Our hands and feet
Shackled by dreams that lack decisions,
Expected to be active,
But not angry,
As the status quo remains,
As slavery shape shifts and is renamed,
As racism rewinds and plays itself again.
And again,
And again.
We are encouraged to be hopeful,
With no foundation for that hope,
Tying our futures to
A shooting star,
That we aren't even sure was there.
So,
I'm done with dreams.
I'm done with hope.
Inactive, passive verbs that sound and feel nice,
but do nothing.
The world needs more than hoping and dreaming.
I'm done with passive love,
Idle love,
Limp love,
That seems charming, but makes no change.
The world needs real love,
Powerful,

In your face,
Aggressive love!
Love that stands up,
Speaks out,
Demands better!
For all of us.
From all of us.

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