

# *How Playing the Banjo Helps Me Think about Curriculum*

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In my graduate course entitled "Curriculum Study" I ask students to reflect on and write about an incident or experience in their own formal or informal education that helps them think about the issues concerning curriculum that we explore in the course.

The starting questions for the course are "what is curriculum?" and "whose curriculum is it?" These questions are addressed in an ongoing fashion by juxtaposing readings about curriculum and curriculum theory with chapters from John Willinsky's *Learning to Divide the World: Education at Empire's End* (1998). Through these readings we explore the connections and tensions between curriculum and knowledge, power, language, culture and social identities. We consider the social, political and historical relationships involved in the production of curriculum. A central tenet of the course is Pinar's insistence that "curriculum is one highly significant form of representation, and arguments over the curriculum ... are also arguments over who we are ... including how we wish to represent ourselves to our children" (Pinar, 1993, p. 60). The autobiographical writing assignment is intended to help the students locate themselves in relation to these curriculum concerns.

A couple of years ago in an introduction exercise I asked the students to tell me why they had enrolled in my course. Amidst the usual reasons (interest in curriculum theory, etc., etc.) one student said that the reason she was taking the course was because during our faculty's orientation to graduate studies I had jokingly mentioned that I played the banjo and

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was always keen to meet other musicians. We had a good laugh, but her comment stayed with me. I felt I owed it to her to bring my banjo to class. Deciding to do so became a way into thinking about how my experiences as a banjo student and player actually helped me to think about curriculum. As I got thinking about it, I realized that my 30+ year relationship with the banjo was a very useful tool for thinking about some of the issues we were addressing in class. It also served as my own autobiographical example of a personal engagement with curriculum. This paper results from that particular banjo debut.

The banjo stories that thread through this paper serve three purposes. First of all, my stories about being a student of the banjo provide a comparative space for exploring some key curricular concepts with my students. Students often understand curriculum to be one-dimensional—a body of knowledge manifested in “course content.” They struggle to understand it as dynamic, as always in relation to the historical, social, cultural and political dimensions of schooling. Secondly, the banjo’s history first as an African-American and later a white American musical instrument provides an interesting place to explore Pinar’s thesis that the curriculum is (always/already) a racial text (Pinar, 1993; Castenell & Pinar, 1993) and that American identity is not exclusively a European-American identity, “[f]undamentally, [the American self] ... is an African-American self” (Pinar, 1993, p. 62). I take Pinar’s observation that identity is what we “displace onto others and [our] self-representation requires repression of the ‘other’” (p. 13), as a starting place to unlearn and relearn the history of the banjo. Lastly, I deliberate on how the study of a cultural artifact such as the banjo and my engagement with it provide insights into how curriculum is embodied (Pinar, 2004) in the both the learner and the teacher.

The paper’s title does not quite capture the complexity of the interrelationship between the banjo stories and curriculum theory, as it implies a uni-directional process wherein the banjo stories help explain curriculum theory. In truth, the process wound up working both ways, as my engagements with curriculum theory also illuminated the banjo stories, enabling me to remember more and to question the limits of my own knowledge about the banjo. In hindsight, what’s here might best be described as resulting from Pinar’s autobiographical method of *currere*.

### Key curricular concepts with a banjo on my knee!

I’m not sure why I bought a banjo when I was 18. It might have been all those Pete Seeger records I had listened to growing up in Toronto. It might have been because there was one in the window of the local music store with the unbelievable price tag of \$50. I couldn’t pass up that bargain!

I bought the banjo and a \$40 case with money from my first part-time job. The banjo was a bluegrass banjo—meaning it had a round, wooden resonating disc on the back, which made it loud to play and heavy to hold. I hadn't paid much attention to banjos at that point—I didn't know that there were different kinds of banjos and different styles of playing—styles that were much older than the seemingly pervasive bluegrass style Earl Scruggs played in the theme music to that TV show, *The Beverly Hillbillies*. The Toronto Folklore Centre offered banjo lessons, so I took about 10 lessons and learned about 5 tunes using a tablature kind of notation. The style I learned was called "frailing" and the first tune I learned was called "Cripple Creek," a well-known Appalachian fiddle tune. I had no reference for the style, I knew nothing about frailers, past or present. I didn't really consider myself a banjo player. Rather, I was someone who owned a banjo and played it occasionally.

In the mid-nineties, I met my current banjo teacher on the street. He was busking at a busy intersection in downtown Toronto. As a kitchen musician, making a decent living doing something other than playing music, I have always appreciated and supported buskers. Chris Coole was playing frailing style banjo—the same style I play. It is unusual, because most banjo players play the bluegrass style. I stopped to listen and to chat. I took down his name and phone number which I thankfully stored in a safe place. Three years later when I decided it was time to try some lessons, I looked up the piece of paper on which I had written Chris' number. I called it with faint hope—as I could not imagine a busking musician to be at the same phone number three years later! As luck would have it, it was the phone number of Chris' parents! Sporadic lessons started, which continue into the present time.

When I tell the story of my history as a student of the banjo, I recall an older story—that of my history as a student of the piano. My banjo story is told against the backdrop of that other story, it does not/cannot stand on its own. My banjo story represents what remains as "left over, as difference" (Castenell & Pinar, 1993, p. 2). It is the marginal of the two stories, but as such it is key as sometimes we can only see what's at the centre by exploring what's marginal to it. The centrality and hegemony of the "standard" curriculum can often only be seen when it is juxtaposed with or challenged by that which is marginal to it. A comparison of the two stories, by way of juxtaposing them with elements of curriculum, is useful here. The elements are many! Those explored here include: a course of study; a teacher; a method; a means of evaluation; a student's response; a hidden curriculum.

Such as it was, my piano learning years were marked by both formal and hidden curricula. The formal curriculum of the piano holds many

similarities to formal school curriculum. For example, there is a formal course of study. My piano lessons were structured by the contents of the Royal Conservatory of Music's piano books. I started with the bright yellow volume entitled: "Grade One Piano." Formal curriculum requires an instructor with appropriate credentials. My piano teacher had her "A.R.C.T."—the highest "level" in piano playing one could attain in the country at that time. In terms of method, actually playing the piano depended on my learning to read music. When playing the piano I was expected to read (correctly) the printed notes and learn to reproduce them on the keyboard—and reproduce them precisely. Evaluation took the form of semi-annual recitals, competition in local annual music festivals and every couple of years, an examination at the Royal Conservatory of Music in downtown Toronto, wherein I received a grade for my efforts to reproduce the required pieces, études, scales (all for memory) and sight reading passages.

It probably isn't hard to guess that I didn't enjoy my piano lessons very much. I recall that I always felt inadequate, always falling short of my teacher's expectations. I recall "forgetting" to bring my music book to my lesson, with the hopes that if I didn't have the book, I wouldn't have to play the piece for my teacher that I had not properly prepared. On the odd occasion when a tune in the piano book was one I knew, I would be overjoyed and keen to learn how to play it on the piano. For the most part, the tunes—simplified versions of music by the great European male classical composers—were unknown to me, and to a great extent, of little interest to me.

It was this early schooling in classical music training that ill-prepared me for my first banjo lesson with Chris! I arrived assuming that he would have tunes written out in tablature, that there would be a "dictation" book (in which he would write out what he wanted me to practise), and that there would be a set repertoire of tunes. Instead, our equipment consisted of a cassette tape in a tape recorder—and of course our two banjos! As far as "credentials" go, Chris had none. He did not belong to a society of banjo teachers. He was simply a dedicated and excellent player. Indeed, he told me that because he couldn't read music, we wouldn't be learning anything out of a book. Chris taught tunes by rote: he played a phrase and I played it back. Sometimes note by note, sometimes phrase by phrase, everything recorded on the tape, including his painstaking verbal directions, such as: "Start on open D, hammer on 2<sup>nd</sup> fret, open 3<sup>rd</sup> string, slide 1<sup>st</sup> fret to 2<sup>nd</sup> fret and then pull-off ...."

Unlike the formal piano curriculum I studied as a small child, there was no banjo primer, no set song titles to learn, no scales or arpeggios, no études, and no exams, recitals, or competitions, either. Chris drew the

repertoire for our lessons from his memory—finding tunes that would best help me learn a particular technique. Or, perhaps he would choose a tune that was similar to one I particularly liked: aesthetic reasons were as likely a driving force as was technique. And the tunes weren't fixed! Once I mastered a tune Chris would ask me if I'd like to learn some variations. Whose variations? They might be his. They might be something he'd learned off an old 78 rpm recording, or at an Appalachian Banjo Festival, or something he'd just thought of then and there. He told me that the only way to make money busking was to play loudly. An open-back banjo is not a loud instrument, so many of the variations Chris played made use of open-string combinations which ring and therefore produce a louder, richer sound. This technique induced him to make up variations to tunes on the spot.

The piano music I had learned as a child was given no cultural, social or historical contexts. It stood on its own. Indeed, the white plastic bust of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart which sat beside my teacher's piano was a fitting metaphor for how the classical music canon separated Mozart's music from his lived life and cultural context. The ubiquitous bust of the classical European composer suggested that music came from the head—it was not embodied. Perhaps it was no accident that the busts were always made of white plastic.

My lessons with Chris were enlivened by his tales of all his encounters with other banjo players. "Here's a tune from the playing Kyle Creed." Or, "here's the way so and so plays that lick." Or "I had such a great time playing with Arnie Naiman! He taught me a really neat way to remember the second half of 'Mississippi Sawyer'!" Or, "Here's the tune I wrote for my dog, Winfield." Formal curriculum, in contrast, utilizes officially sanctioned content, it privileges the written form (a privileging / legitimizing of notated / published music), it summons learners to precisely reproduce the curriculum content (one memorizes—one does not extemporize), it demands that the content is learned for its own sake, (as it is understood to have inherent qualities that stay fixed regardless of the who the learner is or the context of the learning.)

When I think of my piano playing years I think of all sorts of "hidden" curriculum items. I understand hidden curriculum to be both a consequence of, and a necessity for the formal curriculum. It is lessons that need to be learned in order to maintain the hegemony of the officially sanctioned, formal curriculum (McLaren and others, cited in Pinar et al., 1995). The lessons include: the way in which European classical music (both in form and content) became the measure for all other forms of music; the way in which *reading* music became a prerequisite for playing music; the supremacy of the written over the oral / aural; the good manners one practised at recitals

(making a little curtsey or a bow—depending on one’s gender—after one played one’s piece); the mastery and repertoire that was set and recorded by others; the terrible truth that it was easier to lie about not practising than to admit that one had not practised; the eventual realization that one could never practise enough; and, the unfairness that only exact replication was rewarded.

These particularities of the hidden piano curriculum are nicely elaborated by Susan Heald (1991) in her exploration of her memories of studying piano as a school girl:

‘Practising’ was playing the music which my piano teacher had assigned to me for that week. ‘Playing’ could be carried out only after a specified amount of time spent ‘practising.’ But ‘playing’ still meant sticking to the music-as-written; any effort on my part to play in a way that might be ‘inventive’ or ‘imaginative’—as the dictionary defines ‘creative’—was quickly censored by my mother, who would ask, ‘Is *that* practicing?’ (p. 133, original emphasis)

There are not only ‘rules’ about how to comport oneself as a piano player, there are also ‘rules’ about who one must become. These rules summon, just as curriculum summons learners to particular identities. Susan Heald (1991) has noted how playing piano—or more precisely—being a student of the classical piano was intended to shape her into a certain kind of “bourgeois subject” and “female subject” (p. 132).

Playing the piano is an ‘appropriate’ activity for young girls, an indication of ‘culture’ and ‘femininity’ and an alternative way to spend time that might otherwise be spent in more ‘negative’ pursuits. (p. 133)

Piano lessons (and the world of European classical music that these lessons represent) can be seen as operating in opposition to banjo lessons and other types of musical endeavours that challenge the hegemony of the classical music world. Heald recalls being allowed to skip classes in high school, under the auspices of helping out in the music room. Sometimes she helped out in the music room, but often, she simply skipped school: “music was an ‘acceptable’ activity—at least the music I was doing: I suspect that someone who left class to practise in a rock and roll band would have found the school not nearly so forgiving” (p. 132).

When I was finishing my doctoral dissertation and actively looking for an academic appointment I recorded one of my favourite banjo tunes, “Cripple Creek” and used it on my answering machine as the outgoing message. My mother, a retired academic, was horrified and very afraid that I would never get hired if any prospective dean phoned to offer me a job and got the answering machine! Banjo playing and players are seen as marginal to the “real” and the “serious” persona associated with classical music and classical musicians. To portray myself as a banjo-picking academic put me

at risk of not being taken seriously. According to my mother, I was also being disrespectful of the subject position that grad school had summoned me to, groomed me for and expected me to play out.

One could argue that because it is the officially sanctioned curriculum that is on offer—it behooves the learner / recipient to accept it or resist it—consciously and purposefully, or unconsciously and haphazardly. Whereas piano lessons were planned for me—as part of my parents’ scheme of appropriate extra-curricular activities (which included “Red Cross” swimming lessons and “Dalcroze” eurhythmics classes), I fell into banjo playing on my own—by accident. I bought my first banjo by accident. I stumbled upon Chris by accident. And I developed a deep love for banjo music—without any original design or intention to do so. These “accidents” were also choices I made for myself. In psychoanalytic terms, one might argue that the piano is my ego and the banjo is my id (Pinar, 1993).

When I began my career as an itinerant music teacher with the Toronto Board of Education (in 1980) I soon became acutely aware of the marginalization of the banjo received within music education. It was “left over as difference” (Castenell & Pinar, 1993, p. 2). My colleagues dismissed it out of hand, in that they saw it as having only entertainment—read: non-educative—value. It did not belong in the lexicon of European classical music. My efforts to incorporate the banjo into my music teaching was regarded as humorous at best and inappropriate at worst. In other contexts (aside from music education), I continue to puzzle as to why most people laugh or find it amusing that I play the banjo. What is it about the banjo that invites derisive jokes, guffaws, and incredulous comments?

I turn now to the cultural history of the banjo, partly to understand why it is that it remains outside the classical music lexicon, and partly to use it as a device to come to a deeper understanding of curriculum theory. Here, again, Pinar’s method of *currere* is appropriate. In this context, the biography of the banjo itself “becomes a version of cultural criticism” (Pinar, 2004, p. 36).

## Understanding curriculum as a racial text: A short history of the banjo

This section of the paper is based on four points made by American curriculum theorist, William Pinar: Our curriculum mirrors who we think we are and who we want our children to be. White and black Americans are two sides of the same historical and cultural coin. Race, in both its historical and current construction, is the structuring grammar of American identity. Because its role is denied, made invisible and silenced, it operates as a defining aspect of American unconsciousness. Since curriculum reflects

and engages identity, it necessarily follows that all American curriculum is a racial text.

Race is central to Pinar's curriculum theorizing (Pinar, 1993; Castenell & Pinar, 1993; Pinar et al., 1995; Pinar, 2004). "Curriculum," Pinar argues, "[is] a discursive formation of identity and difference" (1993, p. 61). Curriculum both consciously and unconsciously carves out a rendition of "America" and "American" which invariably privileges a white identity that denies its connection to its black roots. Pinar argues that despite ongoing curricular efforts to deny and ignore it, white American history is impossible to imagine outside of the racialized conditions in which white Americans lived, owned slaves, bought slave-produced goods, relied on a slave-labour economy, benefited from segregation laws, thought themselves morally superior, invented fears based on skin colour, saluted the flag and recited the pledge. Conversely, black American history is also impossible to imagine outside of the racialized conditions in which blacks lived/live. However, Pinar argues that despite this symbiosis, the dominant tendency has been to ignore or deny the connection. Therefore, for example, traditional American history is generally silent about Thomas Jefferson's ownership of 200 slaves, let alone the family he fathered with one of his slaves (Paris, p. 171). Racial identity of whites is both suppressed and repressed.

The banjo is an excellent example of Pinar's thesis. While it is predominantly associated with white American musical traditions: first and foremost with bluegrass and secondarily with old-time (read: "hillbilly") music, its origins are African-American and African. When I bought my first banjo when I was 18 years old, I knew little about its history or cultural legacy. In my home growing up there was a well-worn copy of John and Alan Lomaxes' *Folk Song: USA* (1947), from which I vaguely recall learning that the banjo was "America's only original folk instrument" (p. 114). A copy of *Foxfire 3* (Wigginton, 1975) that was lying around my family's cottage included a section on a white Appalachian banjo and dulcimer maker. The banjo, as far I knew was an instrument played by "hillbillies." If African-Americans played the banjo, it was because they had 'borrowed' it from European-Americans, as they had the guitar and the fiddle. Later, in the 1980s—when I started bringing my banjo to my music classes (I was an itinerant music teacher) children would laugh and say "Play 'Duelling Banjos'!", referencing the opening scene in the movie, *Deliverance* (Boorman, 1972).

That particular request says much about how the banjo is perceived in the wider culture. There are not many references to the banjo in American popular culture, but those that exist are poignant in how they frame the banjo as a marker of a particular kind of American, a white "hillbilly." In



the film *Deliverance* there is an opening scene where the white city slicker picks out a duet on his guitar with a backwoods white boy who plays an open-backed banjo. They play a tune called “Duelling Banjos,” deceptively slowly at first and then fiendishly quickly and virtuoso-like. The tune is heard again as part of the musical score when the party sets out on their ill-fated adventure. As they fly down river they pass under a footbridge where the boy who played the banjo in the opening scene, stands, staring down at them and swinging his banjo in a slightly menacing way. The tune “Duelling Banjos” appears throughout the movie—sometimes heard on guitar alone and sometimes as the guitar—banjo duet. At the end of the film the remaining adventurers are met again by the boy. The banjo, I argue, frames the film. It signifies and personifies the “primitive” / “backward” community who challenge the four adventurers at every turn. That my young students would know the movie and ask for the tune is another matter. The point is, their cultural reference for the banjo was a white cultural reference, not a black one.

In a more recent cultural reference, the Coen brothers’ film, *O Brother, where art thou?* (2002) there is a scene wherein the three escapees drive off in the stolen car. One of the characters, Delmar, picks up an open backed banjo he finds on the back seat and starts strumming it as if playing the banjo is a familiar and commonplace activity. It is also interesting to note that the black character in the film, Tommy Johnson, plays the guitar. The banjo references all pertain to white characters.

These references seem to affirm the Lomaxes’ take on the banjo’s origins and history. Their tome, *Folk Music USA* (Lomax & Lomax, 1947) is both a classic and a giant among American folk music compendiums. Of the banjo they say this:

It is related on its mother’s side to certain primitive West African stringed instruments; it was raised up by Negro slaves; it was polished and given a fifth string by one Joe Sweeney of North Carolina in 1840; and strangely, it found its final home, after everyone else had grown tired of it, in the lonesome hollers of the Southern mountains. (p. 114)

Although various accounts of the banjo’s origins differ in small details, it is generally agreed that the instrument originally came from the west coast of Africa. It crossed the Atlantic via the slave trade and over the course of about 100 years or so, existed in various iterations as the instruments that enslaved Africans used to accompany their singing and dancing. The banjo is thought to be derivative of a chordophone from the Senegambia region of West Africa, called a *xalam*. The *xalam* had 3 or 4 strings strung on a wooden neck over a skin-covered hollowed-out gourd. In America and in the Caribbean it became known by enslaved Africans as the *banza*. Whether that name was of African origin, or whether there were other

predecessors other than the Senagambian *xalam*, is widely debated (Webb, 1984; Conway, 1995; Ellis, 2001). From the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, Europeans writing about enslaved Africans made reference to the “bania, banjer, bangoe, bangie, banshaw” (Webb, 1984, p.2), as well as to the “banjo, banjar, strum strum and merrywang” (Ellis, 2001, p.23). Until roughly 1840, the banjo was almost exclusively an instrument of the Africans. But like most music traditions, banjo playing spread because others were exposed to it and wanted to learn. Around that time, white minstrel show impresarios and musicians took up the banjo and incorporated it into musical shows intended for white audiences. While the history of the minstrel show is complex and predominantly racist (in that black culture—including its music and instruments—were lampooned), it was this cross-over that brought the banjo into white musical culture. And, it also “preserved” much of the original music, as white banjo players got busy transcribing the tunes they learned and publishing them in banjo instruction books (which date back as far as 1851) (Ayers et al., 1994, liner notes; Gura & Bollman, 1999).

After the civil war, which “served as a watershed for the dissemination of banjo music” (Webb, 1984, p. 11), from the south to the north, instrument manufacturers, particularly in the north eastern states, began manufacturing banjos for white Americans. As the banjo crossed over to white culture, one of the changes that took place was that the humble and readily available building materials of wood, gourd and animal skin were refined, upgraded and standardized. The gourd body gradually gave way to a wooden rim, and then to a metal rim which borrowed from drum making technologies. This latter change, for the most part, shifted the production of the banjo from the homestead woodshed to the industrial factory where it was mass-produced.

This history mostly resides with ethno-musicologists and banjo enthusiasts. It is not a history readily available to the “average” American—or Canadian, for that matter. In *Ring the Banjar!* Robert Lloyd Webb (1984) traces the banjo from its African origins to factories in the north eastern states that by the mid nineteenth century were manufacturing banjos for white consumers. Webb captures the banjo’s complex history in his opening paragraph:

How little we know about the banjo! The history of the banjo in America tells something of the history of the nation. The banjo takes a place in our folkways, in our humour, and in the tragedies of our past. The banjo belongs to all of us; to blacks, to whites, to the first immigrants and, by adoption, to many of the latest. It casts both bright and dark shadows: banjo is frolic (but banjo is slavery); banjo is entertainment (but banjo is blackface); banjo accompanies the dance (but dancing in bondage, longing to be free). (p. 2)

This illustrates in very concrete terms Pinar's thesis about America's cultural coin. But it is the succeeding paragraph that shows how illusive this shared coin actually is:

Yes, we all know the banjo. But which banjo is it, that we recognize with such certainty? Is it the solitary man's, the high lonesome man's, playing for relaxation on the porch of a mountain cabin? Does it belong to the bejewelled soloist, glittering from the stage of a cavernous theatre as he strums in the most wondrous ways? To the banjo player in the bluegrass band, whose staccato bursts set the pace for the ensemble behind him? Does it belong to a man or woman, seated stiffly in a Victorian parlour, entertaining their coterie of friends with ragtime music and selections from opera? Or is it the minstrel's, his face smeared with the blackness of burnt cork? ( p. 2)

The banjo's black heritage is subsumed by a focus on its subsequent white legacy. Albeit, some of the references are ambiguous (a "high lonesome man" or a "bejewelled soloist" might either white or black), bluegrass, Victorian parlour music and minstrelsy are all part of the banjo's place in white culture.

In his book, *With a banjo on my knee: A musical journey from slavery to freedom*, Rex Ellis (2001) suggests that because of the banjo's context as an instrument of slavery, and its subsequent appropriation into minstrelsy, in "the African-American struggle for acceptance and full citizenship after emancipation, the banjo was seen as an obstacle to overcome" (p. 18). While it did continue as an instrument within black music traditions, its identity with African-American culture was dwarfed by its growing popularity amongst middle class white Americans. This growth in popularity was encouraged by the manufacturers of banjos and the publishers of banjo methods books who took great pains to explain how their particular banjos and method books elevated the banjo above its African-American, "lowly" roots. One such entrepreneur pointed to how the "guitar-style" (of picking) was superior to the "stroke style," and how banjo aficionados who purchased his banjos, played in the concert hall and not on the minstrel stage (Gura & Bollman, 1999). Another claimed the banjo was "not of 'negro origin' as others thought, but rather took its name from the Spanish 'bandore'" (Gura & Bollman, 1999, p. 160). The vast mechanical "improvements" to the banjo in the 1870s, 1880s and 1890s took place, for the most part, in northern factories, and were driven by the desire to make the banjo suitable for classical European music. One virtuoso billed himself as the "Paganini of the banjo" (Gura & Bollman, p. 152). The banjo's minstrel repertoire was often referred to derisively as "plantation music" (Gura & Bollman, 1999).

In northern factories, banjos were made in several sizes, with a wide range of accessories and decorative motifs to suit various family configurations and pocketbooks. By the 1880s the banjo had become a parlour instrument

sized for small children up to adults. There were piccolo banjos, pony banjos, lady-sized banjos as well as novelty banjos of many sizes. Like the piano it became an instrument of respectability. Interestingly, changes were made to its construction to accommodate the growing number of women (“ladies”) who played either socially or professionally. One manufacturer made a closed-back banjo which “[did] away with the screws on the side which flay the dresses of the lady performers (reviewer for the *Boston Daily Evening Voice*, quoted in Webb, 1984, p. 15).”

Pinar’s notion that white America represses its African-American identity might also be illustrated through the documentation provided by nineteenth century photographers and makers of fine china figurines. While the banjo appeared in family and individual portraits of white middle class Americans, which exuded notions of respectability and stability, it also figured in racist figurines (manufactured in Europe as well as in America) of African-American plantation workers, which stereotyped and lampooned African-Americans as pleasure-seeking buffoons (Gura & Bollman, 1999). Pinar suggests that in terms of American identity, the American ego is a European American characteristic and the American id is an African American characteristic (Pinar, 1993; Pinar et al., 1995). The banjo, in the late nineteenth century was employed in representations of both the ego and the id.

I own a Pony Banjo which is a smaller version of a full-size late nineteenth century banjo, suggesting that it was played by a child. It was made by the James Buckbee company in New York—one of the many firms that manufactured banjos for the northern states’ white middle class market. It is delicate in nature, suggesting, perhaps, that it was built to be strummed daintily, summoning a young girl to appropriate female behaviour and comportment through her mastery of this delicate instrument (Heald, 1991). The word “Daisy” has been punched into the metal tailpiece, identifying it by its style and patent, possibly so named to be marketed to young female players.

Skipping ahead to the mid twentieth century, the banjo found its niche in what would become bluegrass music. If it survived in cultural consciousness at all as a black instrument, it might have been as an instrument of ragtime and the jazz bands of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. By and large, by the second world war, it had disappeared from the parlours, the music halls, and the entertainment cards of both white and black America. Its original form and musical style continued in remote areas of the Appalachian and Ozark mountains where its tradition of being handcrafted also persisted (Wigginton, 1975; Webb, 1984). Of interest to (mostly white American) historians and musicologists, the banjo’s “old-time” tradition was analysed and preserved. The tradition is largely associated with white performers, although a handful of black performers still exist (or did exist up until the early 1990s) (Conway, 1995). It is worth noting that its history

as an instrument of choice among white, middle class Americans has been forgotten. Its current-day association with white Appalachia has both race and class connotations.

What's interesting about old-time banjo is that the playing style contains remnants of what is believed to be "original" black playing style. It is the hammer action (down stroke action) of the right hand that seems to match early 19<sup>th</sup> century descriptions of banjo playing amongst black plantation slaves. "Beating on the strings" and the onomatopoeic "strum-strump" (Conway, 1995, p. 196) are two such descriptions, both suggesting the banjo strings were hit rather than plucked or strummed. Although some white old-time banjo players have acknowledged the black roots of their technique and much of their music, the connection has largely been left to the musicologists who have found evidence that closely ties white old-time music to its black predecessor (Conway, 1995; Ellis, 2001). What's interesting about this is how old-time music, to some extent, "[is] a discursive formation of identity and difference" (Pinar, p. 61). Sedimented into Appalachian cultural identity, old-time music (and its instruments—banjo, fiddle and guitar) rely on traditions whose origins lie hidden, denied, forgotten. Regardless of the omission, the banjo and the old-time music it signifies continue to manifest Pinar's thesis that white and black America occupy sides of the same historical and cultural coin and that race is the structuring grammar (Corrigan, 1988) of American identity.

At the end of the Coen brothers' film, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2001), a flood erupts, dispersing the contents of Everett McGill's back country shack in a torrent of water. Along with the cans of Dapper Dan hair treatment, pieces of furniture, etc., a bluegrass banjo floats by on the screen in a dreamlike fashion, perhaps a metaphor for the role the banjo plays in white America's unconsciousness. This suggests to me the verity of Pinar's assertion that the "American self is not exclusively or even primarily a European self. Fundamentally, it is an African American self. ... African Americans' presence informs every element of American life" (p. 62).

Turning to Pinar's observation that curriculum mirrors who we think we are and who we want our children to be, if part of that identity is the (ongoing) repression of its African-American portion, then curriculum must also contain evidence of that ongoing repression. John Wills (2005) spent time observing two second grade classrooms during activities commemorating Martin Luther King Jr. While the teachers strove to emphasize the responsible, peaceful, and non-violent behaviour of the American civil rights hero, the children kept insisting on discussing the violence perpetrated by whites against blacks during that time. The teachers consistently and effectively deflected these discussions back to the focus on King' advocacy for non-violence. While Wills acknowledges three

substantive reasons for this deflection: time constraints, the coupling of the King curriculum with a unit on conflict resolution, and the teachers' concerns that second graders are not emotionally mature enough to deal with "heavy type of issues (p. 125)," he also notes that the deflection holds in place a bifurcation in American experience, that separates black suffering from white violence. Notions of white middle class respectability (rational, non-violent behaviour) thread through the formal curriculum and in doing so deny the underbelly of American culture that enacts a violent response to race and racial tension.

Pinar (1993) notes that the absence of African-American knowledge from school curriculum is "not a simple oversight. Its absence represents an academic instance of racism ... [a] willful ignorance and aggression towards Blacks" (p. 62). Even revisionist curriculum, most notably present in "Black History Month," sediments Black experience within slavery and escape from slavery. *The Underground Railway for Kids: From Slavery to Freedom* (Carson, 1995) is a good example of a curriculum resource for Black History Month. The book traces slavery from its west African origins where "European slave traders and West African kings amassed huge fortunes through the fast-growing Atlantic Slave Trade" (Carson, p. 3), to former slaves' subsequent freedom in Canada via the famous underground railroad, and home again as "citizens to a nation that was free at last" (p. 153). Harriet Tubman is the undeclared heroine of the book. Her life story frames the contents. The book contains stories of slaves and anti-slavery advocates, first person narratives and a variety of activities which include making an "Adinkra cloth ... that is traditional to the Ashanti people" (p. 4), baking "homemade hoecakes" which were part of the "noontime meal [which was] eaten in the fields"(by plantation slaves) (p. 23), fashioning "wartime wrappings" (for wounds gained in battle, presumably) (pp. 146–147) and making a "rubber band banjo" (pp. 26–27). The banjo activity is placed in a chapter entitled "Fleeing a life of bondage." This activity positions the banjo as "an American instrument with African roots" (p. 26)." Its history is skewed by the assertion that: "As generations of American-born slaves built and played banjos, the instrument became popular with both black and white rural people (p. 26)." Its appropriation and subsequent gentrification as an instrument of the white middle class is absent, as is its abandonment by African Americans who viewed it as one of the signifiers of slavery (Ellis, 2001). Students who successfully complete the activity are invited to "play the banjo as you would a guitar, or African-style, by laying it on your lap" (p. 27). This instruction suggests that there were two styles for playing a banjo: a European style (as a guitar) and an African style (as some unnamed, unknown lap instrument). The tension between civilized and primitive and white and black is present in these instructions.

## Some thoughts on being a “kitchen musician” and the pedagogy of “currere”

I have told these two banjo stories (the one that compares my banjo lessons to my piano lessons and the one about the banjo’s history) in both my graduate and pre-service teacher education courses. In the graduate course, as explained at the outset of this paper, both stories support our explorations of curriculum and curriculum theory. In my pre-service course, I use the second story as a way in to examining the limits and possibilities of ‘Black history month.’ In both situations I bring along both of my ‘period’ banjos and I play them. The tunes I play, the strumming style and the actual instruments themselves provide concrete illustrations of the points I make in my lectures. But it is the playing of the banjo that highlights for me how a student’s engagement with curriculum becomes embodied. Borrowing a term from Philip Corrigan (1988), I venture that engagement with curriculum creates a structuring grammar of identity formation. In my case, what’s been embodied is the piano curriculum.

If the truth be told, I hate performing. I identify myself as a kitchen musician. It is in my kitchen where most of my banjo playing takes place. I take great pleasure in playing while I wait for dinner to cook. When I take my banjo playing into the public realm of the classroom, that private pleasure is suddenly transformed into an old feeling of terror about performing. The private pleasure in the kitchen gets juxtaposed with the public terror of the recital hall. It is, in the end, the piano-playing self who inhabits my banjo performances in my classroom. I become the seven year old who was so anxious about performing in her first piano recital, she forgot to curtsy (an omission for which she was scolded). Her performance of “The yellow butterfly” was something to finish as quickly as possible, something she ‘forgot’ as soon as the performance was over.

When I play the banjo for my students, I can feel that old familiar anxiety begin to well up inside. My hands sweat. Sometimes, they shake. I feel as if I cannot quite make contact with the strings. I rush. I miss notes. My banjo becomes a stranger to me. And when I’m finished, I am sure I have played badly. My students (I am certain) are being polite when they express their enthusiasm for my performance. It is the hidden curriculum of my piano lessons that mark me as a banjo performer. I cannot remember a single Mozart sonata, but the lessons of perfection, proper deportment, and memorization have become part of my structuring grammar. And it is only in this reflection that I realize that performance anxiety was learned behaviour: I have always thought it was just me, that I had a character ‘flaw’. Piano lessons were not intended to make me afraid, but since performance was the expected outcome of learning to play the piano, I was forever caught

by the anxiety such a summons generated in me. (My teacher's antidote for the anxiety was more practice not the analyst's couch.) Future iterations of my banjo lecture will include some reflection on how curriculum becomes embodied, with my banjo performance as live illustration.

Similar work, however, could be done with other cultural artifacts which would not require performance on the part of the instructor. The key here is "cultural." For example, images of the canoe might be employed to explore how Pinar's theory about American identity in relation to race might be applied to Canadian identity, wherein European Canadians have a similar relationship to First Nations peoples. The cultural history of the canoe, an icon of Canadian identity, might prove as useful as the banjo in this regard.

Let me turn now to Pinar's method, "currere." I only see its importance now, in hindsight, but it has given me insight into the processes involved in writing this paper. I see all of the four phases of "currere" in this unfolding of my banjo stories. Currere, Pinar explains "seeks to understand the contribution academic studies makes to one's understandings of his or her life (*and vice versa*), and how both are imbricated in society, politics, and culture" (Pinar, 2004, p. 36, emphasis added). My banjo stories both inform and are informed by my engagements with curriculum theory. Recalling both my piano lessons and my banjo playing history might be understood to be the regressive phase, wherein I engage my "past 'lived' existential experience as [my] 'data source'" (Pinar, 2004, p. 36). It is the juxtaposition of these two stories that enables "reaching more truthful versions" (p. 55) of each. This process is fuelled by my desire to come to a better understanding of how curriculum is actually lived, and how it might be possible to understand Pinar's observation that "[f]undamentally, [the American self] ... is an African-American self" (Pinar, 1993, p. 62). This represents the progressive phase wherein "one looks forward toward what is not yet the case, what is not yet present (Pinar, 2004, p. 36)," that is: my and my future students' understandings of curriculum and how race operates as a structuring grammar of identity.

Pinar (2004) describes the analytical phase thus:

In the analytical stage the student examines both past and present. ... The analytic phase is not self-scrutiny for the sake of public performance.... The point of *currere* is an intensified engagement with daily life, not an ironic detachment from it. (pp. 36-37)

While it has been instructive to view my banjo playing in my classroom context as performance, (that is certainly how it has been felt, given the accompanying performance anxiety), the analytic phase encourages me to think about the past and the present in relation to one another. When I



do so, I begin to understand that in the context of my classroom, I play the banjo to illustrate and not to perform. Seeing my banjo playing as illustration and not performance is a way into understanding the back and forth relationship between the past (my piano and banjo playing history) and the present (my desire and efforts to understand curriculum and curriculum theory). This insight (which I have yet to test out) may allow me to enter into Pinar's synthetic phase, wherein, "one re-enters the lived present. Conscious of one's breathing, indeed, of one's embodied otherness, one asks 'who is that?' ..." (p. 37). Who might I be? A kitchen musician not summoned to perform, but inspired to share and teach.

I am inspired by Pinar's insistence that currere is best utilized to instigate and support "an on-going project of self-understanding in which one becomes mobilized for engaged pedagogical action—as a private-and-public intellectual—with others in the social reconstruction of the public sphere" (p. 37). It is my hope that my banjo stories and their accompanying musical illustrations will deepen and become more complex as I continue to explore curriculum, curriculum theory and the place of the banjo in North American culture.

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