Vampiric Inquiry
A Review of *Blood's Will: Speculative Fiction, Existence, and Inquiry of Currere*

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> You know … A wise person once told me, "write what you know."... So, I guess this makes you a vampire. (McNulty, 2018, p. 58)

BLOOD'S WILL: *Speculative Fiction, Existence, and Inquiry of Currere* is a work of what McNulty (2018) calls auto-fiction, combining elements of autobiography and fiction. It uses elements of speculative fiction, including themes of horror/fantasy (in this case, the existence of vampires) in the plot. But it is also a process of educational inquiry, utilizing Pinar's (2004) method of *currere* to create "an opening to self-knowing" (Doll, 2017, p. xv). In her book, McNulty (2018) writes of her past experiences but inserts fantastical elements, leaving the reader to choose what is possible. McNulty (2018) invites her readers into not only her fiction, but also her own life, explaining,

> You may believe this book is a work of fiction. It is, in as much as fiction signifies possibility. But what I have written is also true. And truth relies on limitations and finitudes. Which will you, the reader, choose? (p. 2)

I elected to follow her exploration of memory, alternate possibilities, and transformations, realizing when I finished that *Blood's Will* (2018) is not only a "vampire book," but also a blend of both scholarly and emotional work (McDermott, 2008) that entertains as much as it showcases how *currere* is educational experience.

The *Currere* Process

Blood's Will (2018) is both a work of fiction and qualitative inquiry, existing in a space made possible through Pinar's (2011) conceptualization of *currere*. The term *currere* is the Latin infinitive form of curriculum, meaning "the running of the course" (Pinar, 2004, p. 35). This

method of autobiographical storytelling fuses lived experience with fictional exploration of possibilities, "[emphasizing] the everyday experience of the individual and his or her capacity to learn from that experience; to reconstruct experience through thought and dialogue to enable understanding" (Pinar, 2011, p. 2). It is clear, then, that McNulty (2018) has included elements of her own experience within *Blood's Will*; the autobiographical element is what provides both "the theory and practice emphasizing one's own lived experience, enabling the individual to exist apart from institutional life, creating distance from the everyday for the sake of self-reflection and understanding" (Pinar, 2011, pp. xii–xiii). Through the process of *currere*, McNulty (2018), both as her characters and as the author, are engaging in an inquiry process that will lead to transformation.

The four stages of *currere*—the regressive, the progressive, the analytical, and the synthetical (Pinar, 2004)—are evident in McNulty's (2018) protagonists, Campbell and Finn. Having met each other before the present time of the narrative, they are driven to regress towards past moments that have led to their existences. As their relationship deepens, they experience moments of freedom from the present (analytical) and re-entering it (synthetical). But consistently throughout the book, Campbell and Finn consider what is to come for their relationship and their lives. Their journeys through the stages of *currere* are not linear. Instead, the stages are interconnected (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980) moments that can arise at any point in time, framing a process of self-actualization.

By using *currere*, McNulty (2018) too is engaging in these steps: writing in an autobiographical form (regressive), constructing metaphoric situations for her characters to move through (analytical), re-entering her present to revise, reconstruct, and edit (synthetical), and exploring possibilities for the work of *currere* (progressive). The narrative of this auto-fiction explores possibilities through inquiry, which reflect a "middle passage … in which movement is possible from the familiar to the unfamiliar, to estrangement, then to a transformed situation" (Pinar et al., 1995, p. 548). This middle passage of authorship is apparent in McNulty's (2018) choice of point of view. Though McNulty (2018) is writing from her experience, she elects to tell her story in third person to be more "believable" (p. 2) as well as "cooly" (p. 2) objective. She tells readers, "I write about Campbell as if she were someone other than myself. Maybe, she is" (p. 2). Just as her protagonists undergo transformation through *currere*, so does McNulty (2018) herself, which results in Campbell, as well as *Blood's Will* (2018) being a "décollage": the result of "cutting and tearing identities and 'truths' to reveal other interpretations" (p. 2). Campbell and *Blood's Will* (2018) exist as representations of McNulty's (2018) experiences but also as newly constructed possibilities.

Finn's existence as a vampire is also a fictionalized representation of the *currere* method. *Currere* requires a slowing down of the present, opening the ability to remember and possibly re-enter the past (Pinar, 2004). Through *Blood's Will* (2018), it is clear that like vampires depicted in a range of texts time functions differently for him; however, it is not only his journey, but his very placement within the text that reflects *currere*. Finn is a singular featured supernatural element juxtaposed with an otherwise (and, at times, perhaps all too) realistic setting. He is in love with an overworked, undervalued professional academic, wife, and mother. While Campbell begins the book considering what happiness may mean under the limits of her existence, discovering that vampires inhabit the same world prompts her to question what all is actually possible: What realities are achievable when even existence as you have always known it can be altered?

Blurring of Binaries

Forms of *currere* blur binaries between "real" memories and fiction; yet, both are constructed from the mind's work to fill in gaps and make sense of the world. Neither memories nor fiction are "true" or "facts," but memories are often held in a binary opposed to fiction (McNulty, 2018). When Campbell recalls her childhood memories, she presents the reader with depictions of her friends, family, and Finn, all of whom are tied to her present. Her past is "shared" (Pinar, 2004, p. 135) by all of these characters and, thus, is not simply her subjective experience (McNulty, 2018). Instead, *currere* creates a method for exploring multiple subjectivities, which "destabilizes" the idea that there needs to be one "essential [meaning]" (Gough, 1994, p. 554).

McNulty's (2018) characterization also contributes to the blurring of binaries. Both Campbell and Finn exist in a "middle passage" (Pinar et al., 1995, p. 548) of possibilities. Finn lies in between the human and supernatural. He possesses otherworldly abilities and, at times, is driven by his need for blood, but he is motivated far more by his human desires for community and love. He is neither human nor what readers would expect from a "monster." Likewise, Campbell too blurs binaries of professional and lover, as well as mother and lover. At times, her actions are not what one would expect from a devoted mother, scholar, or wife, which challenges readers' perceptions of her. But because *Blood's Will* (2018) blurs binaries of what it means to be a "good" or "bad" character, the result of reading is not a dividing practice (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). While Finn's existence creates a sense of wonder for readers, requiring them to accept the magical realism for the plot to make sense, Campbell's journey of self-exploration makes readers ask the timeless question, "Can she have it all?" As a work of pure autobiography, McNulty (2018) would be putting her life on display for possible criticism, but by creating characters who reflect aspects of her life, she is able to represent gray areas of humanity, where a choice for one's own happiness may not lead to happiness for all. As Doll (2017) explains, "Fiction—more than fact—teaches wisdoms about the human condition precisely because fiction connects readers with what courses within themselves" (p. 48); hence, the method of *currere* enables McNulty's (2018) past, present, and future possibilities to become larger than a personal process. Now, her characters, or aspects of herself, are symbols of very identifiable searches for existences they can live within.

McNulty's Artistry

Blood's Will (2018) is a standalone work of *currere*, but it is also an articulate culmination of McNulty's (2018) thoughts on artistic forms of inquiry that have been developing for some time. Ten years before *Blood's Will* (2018) was published, McNulty's "Created Worlds and Crumbled Universes" came to readers through *Creating Scholartistry: Imagining the Arts-Informed Thesis or Dissertation* (McDermott, 2008). Her chapter "[explored] the ways that thinking and being collide, explode, and emerge, like the birth of a star, to create an arts-informed research study" (McDermott, 2008, p. 136). Though she did not directly engage in *currere* at that time, McNulty's feelings towards the writing process seem to reflect early preparation and exploration for what she would produce in *Blood's Will* (2018). As with *currere*, McNulty tells readers that arts-informed inquiry "requires complete immersion of the whole being: knowledges, feelings, memories, hopes, and fears" (McDermott, 2008, p. 138). She describes her memories as an "inner labyrinth" forming from "the myriad of possibilities that swirl around each of us every second of every day, making order out of chaos" (p. 143). The references to memories and

possibilities echo Pinar's (2004) explanation of *currere*. Though she does not call it *currere* in that early work, McNulty's beliefs on the relationships between events clearly carry to her book years later, with characters going through the processes she describes: "I believe that life events past, present, and future produce a kaleidoscopic lens through which we construct, disrupt, define, and embody notions of 'self,' 'reality,' and 'truth'" (McDermott, 2008, p. 137). From examining McNulty's earlier process of arts-based inquiry and writing, it is clear that *currere* is an artistic process (McDermott, 2008), making *Blood's Will* (2018) a work of art.

Blood's Will as Educational Experience

Critiques of creative curricular methods may ask, "[W]hat does all this myth, memory and dream stuff have to do with curriculum?" (Doll, 2017, pp. xiv–xv). First, this blend of autobiography, fiction, and engaging with texts has the ability to create educational situations that "release" (Greene, 2001) learners from "definitive proofs" (McNulty, 2018, p. 243). By regressing into the past, *currere* can help "recover those moments when imagination … [could] open worlds" (Greene, 2001, p. 179), resulting in new possibilities for the future. In her "Afterword," McNulty (2018) tells readers that, like Campbell, she faced a similar struggle with asking herself "What if…?" (p. 245). Visually, there is a purposeful ellipsis for the reader—a space not held with words, but instead an opening for interpretive possibility. *Currere* asks learners to explore "What if…?" (p. 245), valuing all possibilities, even the notion that a vampire can exist in an otherwise realistic setting. Doll (2017) reminds readers that, as *currere* means "'running' of the course," "it is the self that runs that course" (pp. xiv–xv); consequently, there are as many possibilities as the self will allow, which should be what education emphasizes.

Pinar (2011) recognizes that an issue in the United States' educational system is that "the human subject has been split from the school subject" (p. xi). The school subject is traditionally defined as what is taught or learned ("content"), while students' needs, emotions, and characters are not often included in this content (Pinar, 2011). *Currere* is an opposition to this traditional educational structure, allowing students to enter into biographic situations (Pinar, 2004). Meaning is explored, destabilized, and transformed from an individual's past experiences. Doll (2017) sees this regression into "personal histories" as a natural "urging" (p. xiii). Students seek to understand themselves as well as their world. Pinar (2011) determines subjectivity as necessary for education, adding that it is where "we begin to know ourselves and the world we inhabit and that inhabits us" (p. 8); thus, *currere* puts the needed human element back into the educational process. *Blood's Will* showcases how entangled McNulty's (2018) subjective experience has been with her academic learning. Her book reveals that "there is a curriculum to each of our lives" (McNulty, 2018, p. 1).

Blood's Will (2018) is also an example of how referenced texts can serve as points for inspiration, not simply documentation of what has been learned. When engaging in *currere*, the individual's experience within the curriculum is privileged, allowing the writer to distinguish what texts create meaning. Texts outside of an academic cannon may be drawn from. In *Blood's Will*, McNulty (2018) is able to reference a variety of texts that contributed to her lived experience, from bell hooks's (1995) *Art on my Mind* to Whedon's (1998) *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, with the amount of emphasis she desires, not what traditional education would dictate. But it is not enough to cite them; McNulty (2018) draws from these texts to shape the characterization, dialogue, and fictional elements of her work. Though both employed as professional academics, Campbell and Finn

discuss vampires as they would other scholarly subjects, referring to examples throughout history (McNulty, 2018). Through her active incorporation of sources, it is clear not only *what* meant something to her in various stages of her past, but *why* it did. In a world of education where citing textual evidence is continuously emphasized, *currere* offers students ways to have meaningful interactions with sources.

What Happens at the End?

Many consider the above question while reading a work of fiction. At times, this question propels them to keep reading, considering possibilities. When there is, in fact, an end, so many possibilities are diminished. The reader has the answers. *Blood's Will's* (2018) plot has to end. After all, it is a printed text that has been bound with a certain number of pages. But McNulty (2018) views fiction differently from beginnings and endings, explaining that fiction "is the opposite of finitude" (p. 4). Her views towards time are expressed in the existence of Finn, a vampire who is reunited with someone from his past, made possible because his supernatural lived experience allows time to fold, rupture, and overlap (McDermott, 2008, p. 147). Appropriately, *Blood's Will* (2018) does not include resolution so much as it offers possibilities. If *Blood's Will* is a result of McNulty's (2018) artistic inquiry into her lived experience, "the end is always the beginning" (McDermott, 2008, p. 136). Artistic inquiry and *currere* are both nonlinear, and often circular, methods. *Currere* is a process of "self-shattering, revelation, confession, and reconfiguration" (Pinar, 2004, p. 55). Campbell ends the book physically and metaphorically shattered, which will again spark a new process of "self-understanding" and "self-motivation" (Pinar, 2004, p. 55). There is no end for Campbell, just as there is no end for McNulty (2018), who tells readers on her first page that she is "the subject writing herself" (p. 1). As a reader, I considered what would be next for McNulty (2018) as much as I did for Campbell and Finn. The process of *currere* allows memories to not only reflect the past, but also to serve as "catalysts for future action" (McNulty, 2018, p. 4), making me wonder what both author and characters will explore when any future action is possible.

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