When the Façade of the Normal Falls Away

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The pandemic made us hold our breath for a return to "normal." But education in "normal" times involves race-based violence and class-based inequality that the pandemic simply made plainer to see. Reviewing the impacts of the pandemic and action for racial justice over the last two years, I show how the dislocation of the "normal" laid bare what Riz Ahmed has called "a 'normality' of entitlement and extraction.

> But what had [the pandemic] revealed about us? About our complicity in this façade? For too long, we have clung to our own roles in this pantomime, delivering lines written for us and wearing the masks assigned to us. These masks rather than protecting us, rendered us collectively breathless – serving a "normality" of entitlement and extraction … "Normality," it turns out, was as flimsy and painted-on as a Snakes & Ladders board game, arbitrarily dealing out victory and defeat, life and death. The board has been flipped over by a stray strand of viral RNA in Wuhan, by a brutal viral video from Minneapolis, and something has been stripped away – the façade of it all.
> – Riz Ahmed (2020)

I read so many articles and heard a lot of remarks during the ebbs and flows of COVID-19 that started with the quote from Arundhati Roy (2020) about the pandemic being a portal. As with the history of crises based on the spread of some disease or other, when our language fails us, we fall back on metaphor. And Roy provided us, in the "portal," an opening of space and time. I assigned the article to my students in the spring of 2021, along with some other essays (including Sontag's "The Way We Live Now" [1986]). The one that resonated with them and that provided the through line for our work in the course – and the thematic for this essay – was written by British actor Riz Ahmed and published in *British Vogue*, in which he reflected on the fears of his immigrant parents and his anxieties for their survival in the midst of a virus that emerged amid the ongoing suspicion of (Brown) first-generation Muslim residents of post-Brexit Little Britain. He suggests that the persistent chorus of "when we can return to normal" fell differently on his ears; he called out the "normal" that steals the very breath from some of us through neglect or by "normal" violence. As we looked through these more literary reflections of the pandemic and looked ahead to various assessments of educational inequity during COVID, we were already attuned to the inequity of "the way we were." COVID was less a creator of race-based and class-based inequality than its megaphone.

The "pivot" that took place in every institutional setting over the spring of 2020, beginning in March – including the NBA, Broadway, and the local grocery store – hit educational institutions with the force of an improvised explosive device. That detonation dispersed shrapnel of misinformation and existential dread. At residential institutions of higher education, many students were sent "home" for spring break or something like it with a muddle of instructions about whether they should take their belongings with them. At my own institution, the initial communication suggested that after spring break courses would go online for two weeks; stay tuned for further news. At that moment, people were being advised to sanitize items coming into the home, including groceries; non-medical civilians were advised to leave the masks for medical frontline workers; and messages from the federal government were loudest about keeping the economy moving. Universities made early predictive

statements about the fall semester, and K–12 public schools were caught in a cacophonous sonic boom about the public responsibility of schools and their employees to the children, the families, the communities, and the local and national economy.[1]

From the moment the understanding dawned that April was not going to see the return to anything normal and that summer heat was probably not going to "bake" away the virus, the "normal" inequities of schooling, as well as employment, reverberated through society, including in the media. In colleges, the shift to online instruction presumed that every student had the means to connect to the official online learning platforms. Emptying the dorms presumed that every student had a home or a country to return to with terrific Internet connection, a screen with all the instructional programs an iSchool could dream of, and a room of one's own. There was a presumption that every instructor (including part-time, contingent, and graduate student teachers) had access and training in online instruction or could devote their summer (when they were not getting paid) to creating a magical curricular and pedagogical experience. There was a presumption that all the employees who could not do their jobs online – jobs that were set for summer pay – would be able to soldier on without that pay or without the access to their labs, research opportunities, or technological supports.

Then, on many campuses, there began to be communication about the financial consequences of COVID and the justification for job cuts – and the rescission of hiring offers, searches, and support programs for underrepresented minority students. In many cases, those vulnerable programs and initiatives served racially vulnerable populations at all levels of institutions. For individuals and groups from institutions who were (already) engaged in racial protests when COVID hit, the financial "crisis" at universities was viewed (with both prescience and cynicism) as a lever for offloading the demands of Black students, DREAMers,[2] and undocumented students.

K–12 schools in places with already decrepit facilities and seriously inadequate resources serving Black, Brown, and poor children faced multiple dilemmas that simultaneously affected kids, school staff, and families. When schools closed altogether or attempted to go hybrid or to alternate hours in order to maintain some version of social distancing, the more challenged a community was in pre-pandemic days, the more likely disruptions were to have serious consequences for their children. In one diverse urban district with connections to Silicon Valley, families were given free access to donated laptops loaded with software and curricula.[3] In another majority-minority urban district, even after every laptop or tablet available was lent out, more than 2,000 students went without.[4] More than 1,000 students "went dark" during the pandemic, and some have "permanently" lost contact with the district even now. Some cities were equipped to offer some childcare for essential medical workers, which left other essential workers – including grocery store personnel and many of the non-medical workers in hospitals' food production facilities, and other low-paid workers – with limited options, if any, to figure out how to monitor schooling and maintain their wages simultaneously. Families without extra space for multiple children to have quiet study or classroom space – much less multiple devices and sufficient bandwidth – struggled to get, complete, and submit assignments – if those assignments were even forthcoming.

After the shift to online instruction, I taught a middle school teacher who was expected to talk by phone to each of her students multiple times a week to catch up with them. During the remainder of the school year, there was not an established means of moving between online instruction. Even though at the time, the medical information widely available suggested that pre-teen children were the least likely to get seriously ill, the adults in schools were rightfully concerned about their own health, as well as that of vulnerable family members or co-residents. In addition, the services that young students

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[1] This urgent moral responsibility of care was not offered reciprocally, whether to public school janitors, teachers, and bus drivers, or college dining hall workers or contingent faculty. We learned a dozen ways to parse the concept of "essential" work.

[2] Undocumented minors granted temporary conditional residency through the proposed 2001 DREAM Act.

[3] Personal correspondence with a parent of an elementary school student, November 2020.

[4] From conversations with one middle school teacher and one school district administrator (from the same school district) in the summer of 2020.

and their families accessed through school, from Free and Reduced Lunch to counseling to daily structure of time and regularity, were abruptly removed. Obviously, the cessation of services most profoundly affected students who were most vulnerable in the "normal" times – students with disabilities, unhoused students, students with complex family situations, and students who have guardians with employment, health, legal, and social obstacles of their own.

As schools and colleges prepared, from mid-March on, to ramp up all kinds of resources for the summer and in preparation for the fall of 2020, all the "normal" vectors of social, racial, and economic inequity were increasingly visible across the country, even in places where the coronavirus pandemic was not yet at a crisis point.

Then, at the end of May 2020, a white Minneapolis police officer knelt on the neck of a Black man suspected of passing a counterfeit 20-dollar bill for nine minutes and twenty-nine seconds in front of witnesses on the street. At the end of that encounter, George Floyd was dead, and by the next week the next wave of #BLM, Black Lives Matter, was launched. This new wave radiated out from Minnesota across America and across the oceans and seas. For a whole summer, at least, the Movement for Black Lives, sparked by this murder committed in plain sight and disseminated through every social media planform, reignited the trauma for Black folks that has been experienced as intergenerational, physically disabling, and psychologically scarring, back from before the killing of Trayvon Martin that launched the first social media campaign to use the hashtag in 2013. The extralegal killing of Black people in all manner of settings in the US and beyond forms a legacy that certainly did not begin with Derek Chauvin, the police officer convicted of killing George Floyd, nor end there. Roughly simultaneously, the death of Breonna Taylor in an illegitimate police raid that had occurred months earlier was thrust into the spotlight. Kimberlé Crenshaw, the legal scholar and social critic, had already created #SayHerName in 2014 to remind us that Black women and girls (cis and trans) were also targets of police killings and gender-based violence.

So why did this particular killing and subsequent protest movement galvanize the public? The idea of the "twin pandemics" (COVID and anti-Black violence) was compelling as a narrative device. And while scientists were continuing to develop the virology of the coronavirus and possible vaccines, civilians were looking their friends and colleagues in the eye on Zoom or in person and were increasingly unafraid and highly motivated to speak truth to power, to remind white colleagues, family, and friends that just as we non–lab scientists would not be able to solve COVID, we non-white folks could not dismantle white supremacy or anti-Black racism.

The summer of black squares for #blackouttuesday and performative allyship was "on," in addition to some genuine introspection and calls for action (rather than just more statements). There were marches in the hundreds of thousands; young Black and Brown poets and musicians were everywhere; city streets were being "muralled" with BLACK LIVES MATTER; Breonna Taylor and George Floyd covered the toniest of magazines, with their faces rendered by brilliant Black artists. And yet. And yet. At the same time as the mainstream media spread the word that "this is not a moment; this is a movement" and the headlines proclaimed that white people were softened up by authors Robin DiAngelo (*White Fragility*) and Ibram X. Kendi (*How to Be an Antiracist*) just for "the reckoning," the killings did not stop; the protesters in cities across America were meeting the same military-grade vehicles and weapons as were faced in Ferguson in 2014, when Michael Brown was killed by a white police officer; and the protests were infiltrated by right-wing, neo-Nazi, Proud Boy-esque figures who looted or even killed with little interference from those same police. Those who had a history with the energy for change that disperses like mist over time were mostly holding their powder but trying to expend their own energies in self-care and mutual aid as they dealt with illnesses, violence, death,[5] and

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[5] In October 2021, KFF published cases and death statistics and trendlines for COVID from June 2020 to the present, divided by race and ethnicity. When accounting for differential age distribution by race/ethnicity, the statistics for American Indian/Alaskan Native, Black, and Hispanic populations showed disparities from the summer of 2020 through January 2021 (and again during the Delta variant surge of early fall 2021) at a rate of about two times for cases, hospitalization, and death over white and Asian populations. See Artiga, Hill, and Haldar, 2021.

terror – as well as aching hearts and weary souls. Nevertheless, there continued to be explosions of creativity and calls for Black joy, even in the midst of this.

There was a convergence of movement energy around prison abolition, "defunding" the police, dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline, getting police (and guns) out of schools, creating curricula that told the truth about American history, and correcting the traditions of medical racism.

While we Black folks were determined to keep our children alive, insisting that our lives matter, we were not thinking overmuch about what and how other communities were doing to sustain this moment/movement. The support for #blacklivesmatter has declined precipitously among white Americans in the year following the summer of 2020 peak,[6] at the same time as trust in law enforcement has risen. As children headed back to school in the fall of 2020, attention was split between the declining COVID numbers, returning to face-to-face school at all levels, and calls on the part of faculty, staff, and students for anti-racist education (as opposed to generic reliance on the weak-sauce diversity, equity, and inclusion [DEI] campus and consultant landscape). The 2020 presidential election brought uncertainty and a planned chaos that culminated on January 6, when terrorists stormed the US Capitol to prevent certification of the election results.

Many classroom teachers were searching for curricular interventions to support anti-racist work, and multiple states passed legislation during 2020 (even before the Floyd murder) to teach various ethnic histories in the US (Mercer, 2020). In May 2020, K–12 educators got assistance from the Pulitzer Center when the Pulitzer Committee awarded Nikole Hannah-Jones the Pulitzer Prize "For a sweeping, provocative and personal essay for the ground-breaking 1619 Project, which seeks to place the enslavement of Africans at the center of America's story, prompting public conversation about the nation's founding and evolution."[7]

The *New York Times Magazine* had published the 1619 Project and then partnered with the Pulitzer Center to provide additional curricular materials for K–12 classrooms. The project's publication in 2019 and the multiple awards won caused a frothing of the mouths and the shedding of many a white tear – from (a vocal, but small number of) historians and journalists alike. Nevertheless, many teachers and afterschool programs made use of the materials to spur critical thinking about the accounts provided in textbooks of the Black experience in America, beginning with the arrival of the 20 Africans accounted in Hannah-Jones's opening essay and moving all the way to the present.

Meanwhile, right-wing strategist Christopher Rufo "discovered" a 30-year-old theoretical construct put forth by legal scholars to explain, among other things, why colourblindness in the law was unlikely to lead to justice and how the legal system's normalization of racism (from its earliest seeds in US jurisprudence) was deeply troubling to them insofar as the effects in the real world were also troubling. The likelihood of anyone in K–12 schools ever hearing the phrase "critical race theory" before 2021 was slim; some of their teachers may have learned it in passing in graduate school. Certainly, some legal scholars may have heard of it. Many of us who teach history, philosophy, social foundations, and social theories of education learned it in graduate school and/or teach it as one framework for thinking about educational research to our graduate students. But somehow, while anti-mask, anti-vax governors and their governed are filling the agendas of school boards across the nation, a second species of disruption has emerged around schooling under the omnibus title of "critical race theory." This deeply suspect theory's content is never actually described by its antagonists; they only suggest its putative effects: to divide, to call all white people racists, to get students to hate their country. So, these same parents who cry foul at any government mandates about COVID masks/vaccine demand governmental bans on a history barely even taught in most schools in the country. And the resultant bans would be so broad that it would be difficult to teach about the realities of slavery, or the Chinese Exclusion Act or the residential Indian Residential Schools of the late 19th century or the effects of race on education.

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[6] See Civiqs, "Black Lives Matter: Registered Voters – April 25, 2017 — February 10, 2022."
https://civiqs.com/results/black_lives_matter?annotations=true&uncertainty=true&zoomIn=true&race=White.
[7] https://www.pulitzer.org/winners/nikole-hannah-jones-new-york-times

And perhaps that is the purpose: to remain willfully ignorant of all the unkept promises of the past to absolve the structures and beneficiaries of white supremacy of the racism that forms the foundation of the spaces they occupy. Unfortunately for these activist-parents and their anti-Black racist supporters, their children no longer rely on a shared family watch of the nightly network news or on a print paper. This generation of young people was able to see the George Floyd murder for themselves and watch the protests (if they weren't in them). And they are still young enough to believe that adults should keep their promises (Black Lives Matter, you say?) and smart enough and tech-savvy enough to experience the resonances of the calls for racial justice around the world, as experienced already in global environmental youth movements, gun reform, LGBTQ coalition building, and demands for greater political participation.

Ignorance costs. When COVID hit, students saw up close that even good intentions did not produce equitable outcomes; they experienced the digital divide, the differences in housing, in food insecurity, in healthcare access, in the ability of some to get extensive parental support in schoolwork at home. In online school they might even have seen more closely how some kids in class were surveilled differently than others on Google Classroom. Many kids (and adults) in these permanently inequitable classrooms, households, and communities had so normalized inequities that COVID was not only *not* a portal, it wasn't even a window; the pandemic shed no new light on their condition. But others have been awakened and are made suspicious by the blatant mis- and dis-information promulgated inside and outside their homes and schools, and by the direction to turn their heads and look away from the injustices that the dislocation of the "normal" laid bare for them.

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