Beyond Pandemic Pedagogy: Thoughts on deconstruction, structure, and justice post-pandemic

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As I walked around my desolate neighbourhood in the cold days of early-spring 2020, shell-shocked by the stay-at-home orders related to COVID-19, I looked up at the tall buildings around me and thought about all the lives being lived in those apartments. The panic and fear that had enveloped the preceding weeks had halted the work I was engaging in related to history and social studies education and I could not help but wonder if it even mattered anymore. Was history education going to seem like navel-gazing in the face of this virus? We will never have a historical record that captures the range of experiences being lived around me – would this matter when COVID was remembered? Is remembering even relevant when we were just trying to cope? Selfishly, I also had a book coming out. I book where I argued that teaching and learning history is best suited in an affective, community-based learning environment. Could we even 'imagine a new we' if we were not in classrooms together anymore? How would be facilitate connection, complexity, and care for our students when we needed to stay apart (Cutrara 2020d)?

I shared my fears, questions, and confusions in a short video on my YouTube video channel (Cutrara 2020a) and, as I've written about elsewhere (Cutrara 2020b), this video sparked reflection and conversations within my community of friends and colleagues. Inspired by this response, I started a video series talking to people in the history and history education community about history and history education during and post-pandemic. The conversations were first available as video, then podcast, and then as transcripts available as an Open Educational Resource (OER).[1] Taken together, these 40-plus conversations trace the ways historians, archivists, social studies teacher educators, history teachers, museum workers, and others were thinking about history and history education during March to July 2020.

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[1] All of the conversations can be found here: https://www.imagininganewwe.com/videos/pandemic-pedagogy

When reading the transcripts back in fall 2020, I could not help but hear the naivety in those early March and April conversations – "we'll be back in our classrooms before the school year is over!" we said – but I also heard a somewhat empowered tone that narrated the injustices we were seeing around us. This tone, this sense of possibility within our weariness and confusion, was exciting and insinuated a precipice for change.

While the poststructural concept of "deconstruction" is often associated with tearing things apart, Jacques Derrida's concept of deconstruction was actually about watching, about witnessing, how things – structures, for example – were *already* torn or were never really whole to begin with. Derrida wrote that structures are created and bolstered by a sense of their fixedness – "One cannot in fact conceive of an unorganized structure," he writes (Derrida 1978, 278) – and these structures seemed fixed through a centre, an origin point, that rationalizes the sense of its inevitability. However, structures are not beyond history or people. Structures are organized by and for human experience or, more specifically, for interpretations of, or desire for, certain types of experiences or behaviours over others. Structures are both what they are and what they are not. They are not these solid unbreakable things with a clear place of genesis; they are cracked, they are punctuated with absences, with residue of experiences, structures, words, or ideas that, if acknowledged, threaten to undermine the structures as a whole.

Deconstruction, therefore, is not tearing apart the structure – it is the *witness* of how the structure was, and is, a construction. It is the affirmation of experiences or ideas that have been left out to ensure the system looks solid and secure. It is looking/hearing/witnessing what is *not* there, what is absented, to better understanding how, by virtue of being absent, the structure can make itself seem fixed and stable.

Derrida has talked about how we can often engage in this deconstruction, this witnessing, when there is an "event," an unexpected, surprising rupture in/to the structure itself.[2] It is through and because of this rupture, where we can hear the voices the structures have silenced and we can witness the experiences the structures have (attempted to) curtail. By listening to and responding to these Othered voices and experiences, we can better see, and thus act in ways that support, greater space for justice, for democracy, for revolution (Derrida et al. 1994, 32).

COVID, following from this understanding, is an "event." George Floyd's and Breonna Taylor's murders that sparked worldwide Black Lives Matter protests is another "event." Many of us coming to the Pandemic Pedagogy conversations already had an ethico-political attitude for justice and change, and engaging in deconstruction sparked by the events of 2020 allowed us to better articulate the revolution toward democracy we saw was needed.[3] We were bearing witness to the ways in which structures of education, social services, health care, criminal justice, policing, among other interlocking social systems, were, and always has been broken; and we were speaking to this brokenness in an effort to advocate for the justice needed for a revolutionary and democratic future.

However, while we were speaking to the need for revolution, as the series went on, I also began to see how easily or casually those spaces for making change can close up and revert back to "normal" and fail to answer the call to justice brought forward by the event(s). As we moved further in the series, further away from the shock of March and closer to the preparedness needed for August/September, the conversations through the video series, and the ones observed through popular and social media,

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[2] This "we" is a bit amorphous here because many of those whose lives live within those broken cracks do not need an "event" to see it. Thus, the "we" here refers to anyone who identifies as being Other in this situation, even if they are not Other in Other situations. Thus, in this paper (and elsewhere) the "we" is not constant – it shifts and changes based on the power and privilege within a moment, structure, or event – and is used as a flag for majority affected by current societal changes.

[3] Both "democracy" and "future" in this context is drawn from Derrida et al. (1994, 36): "The openness of the future is worth more than this: that is the axiom of deconstruction – the basis on which it has always set itself in motion, and which links it, like the future itself, to Otherness, to the priceless dignity of Otherness, that is to say to justice. It is also democracy as the democracy of the future."

became more practical and less emancipatory. There seemed less of a need to have new conversations about pandemic and post-pandemic pedagogy and more of a need to provide practical and possible solutions to the coming year's (impossible) return to school. Participants talked about the *need* for change, but also spoke with skepticism that changes could actually be made.

And thus I began thinking: How, after the rupture of this event, after our witnessing of brokenness and need for justice, could we engage in practices and policies that failed to answer this call for change? How, after an event, do we go back to "normal"? *Why* do we go back to normal? How can we see and capture that moment of deconstruction in ways that navigate for change *and* do something different, do something more just, do something closer to democracy (Derrida et al. 1994, 36)? And what do these questions mean in the context of history/social studies education?

In this article, I draw on my "Pandemic Pedagogy" conversations from March to June 2020 to demonstrate how they provided a moment of deconstruction toward justice. I then turn to public and social media conversations from the fall of 2020 to highlight how the moments of change in education were not happening despite so many of us seeing the need for them. By pairing seemingly contradictory conversations at two points of time during the ongoing COVID/BLM-"event(s)," I want to continue to bear witness to the deconstruction of our structures related to education, especially history social/studies education, and suggest that it is the gravitational pull toward a seemingly stable structure prompted by the rupture of the event, that can (re)move us from the work of turning deconstruction toward justice. In this way, I want to model a (re)turn toward the revolutionary change that can happen post-pandemic and (re)mind myself, at the very least, of the deconstructive space for possibility and justice even more needed in our education post-pandemic.

Pandemic Pedagogy

Pandemic Pedagogy was a conversational video series filmed between March 20 and June 25, 2020. Based in Canada, the conversations were mainly with Canadian scholars and educators, but also

included scholars and educators from America, Australia, and England. Conversations revolved around three central questions given to the participants in advance filming, with follow-up questions as the conversation unfolded. The three questions were:

- Are you thinking of history differently because of COVID?

- Do you think we should teach history differently after COVID? Do you think we will?

- Do you think there are more possibilities to "imagine a new we" during/after this – either through the possibilities of "imagining" and creation and/or through the coming together of a new or different collective?

After George Floyd's murder, the series paused for a week and resumed with conversations referencing the protests. Because some videos were filmed before the protests, throughout June a date stamp was placed on the videos to indicate when the original conversation took place.

The video series was independently run with no funding or monetization coming to or from the conversations. While I am employed by a large university as a Curriculum Specialist, this series was created and produced separate from this work, and thus I rarely used my institutional affiliation as a way to introduce myself to potential participants or audience members. Filming took place outside of formal working hours but at times convenient for participants. The invitation to participate was left open on social media, but it through explicit targeted invitations where I connected with the majority of participants. While I was open to a range of perspectives, I recognize that my own theoretical perspectives on history and history and social studies education shaped the types of conversations we had. My work generally is on the affective and subjective dimensions of history, and the feminist and antiracist reverberations for youth and their lives when teaching outside one-dimensional rote or didactic teaching methods (Cutrara 2010, 2012, 2018a, 2018b, 2019, 2020c).

After a summer hiatus, the series continued in the fall but with less emphasis on the three questions – history *during* this, teaching history *after* this, and 'imagining a new we' – and more

emphasis on current event topics, discussions on twitter, and showcasing primary sources. I found that conversations on the three questions did not seem as relevant or as urgent anymore, since a desire for the practical dominated teacher conversations on social media. Because I did not see the series as being didactic in terms of discussing specific teaching and learning practices, I moved away from exploring these types of conversations and eventually paused the series in early-2021 to assess the video series in the context of the future needs of history education. The series was exciting and unique in those first few months of COVID and provided a place to have, and hear, conversations about pedagogy and practice that few people were having elsewhere. In the next section, I'll share the themes that came through in these discussions and then will contrast these discussions with the themes that came from the media during the return to schools in fall 2020.

Early Perspectives

The Pandemic Pedagogy conversations act, and acted, as a place for reflection and conversation about history and history education during the early days in this crisis. However, they also act as a historical snapshot of the first three months of the pandemic and the effect, or anticipated effect, it was having on education, history education in particular.[4] In Ontario, where most of the conversation participants were from, the pandemic was declared the Friday before March Break, and in the first few conversations many of us referenced that we would be back in classes in April after an extended break. However, as historians, we were also haunted by the possible/impossibilities of our predictions. Archivist and comics creator Chris Sanagan (2020) said he likened our predictions to World War One when people said that the war would be over by Christmas.

These (in hindsight) foolhardy predictions reflected how we were situated in a consciously historical moment that we did not have epistemological, phenomenological, or emotional tools to

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[4] Conversations referenced in this section represent a sample of the series and isn't indicative of conversations that are at greater or lesser quality than others. I encourage readers to watch/listen to all the conversations found here: https://www.imagininganewwe.com/videos/pandemic-pedagogy

understand. It demonstrates how we tried to place ourselves in this unknowing and how we tried to extend this sense-making to teaching history in this moment. Ideas about getting students to document their experiences in COVID were common elements of our conversations, especially in a comparative context (Whitfield and Cutrara 2020). Although there were caveats about putting too much pressure on students to record and document (Llewellyn and Cutrara 2020) and the amount of records we will generate – how do we, or will we, define future archival value (Sanagan and Cutrara 2020)? These conversations allowed us to talk about archives and archival records – especially given the current professional emphasis on teaching historical inquiry based in primary sources – and ask questions such as: What is recorded? What is saved? What are the voices emphasized in our historical narratives because of these decisions about recording and saving? Professor Bonnie Laughlin-Schultz (2020) asked these questions in our conversation, drawing on her experience as a historian of 19th century women, and emphasized the importance of exploring the limitations of history writing when we solely place the emphasis on archived sources. She also saw this moment as a way to archive differently, and has continued thinking about this work in her reflection found in this issue (Laughlin-Schultz 2021).

However, the biggest theme that came up in all the Pandemic Pedagogy conversations was how we have been able to see the inequities of our social, political, economic, and cultural structures in ways we may not have before. As I've done in this article, and my other work in this field (Cutrara 2012, 2020d), I explicitly drew on poststructuralism to make the implicit discussions about this more explicit in the conversations, but even when participants did not make these links themselves, the emphasis on structural failure seen through the pandemic was often a key part of our conversation. We would talk about how structures were revealing themselves to be inequitable, revealing how they were *designed* to be inequitable (Hawkman, Shear, and Cutrara 2020), that explicit choices had been made to *ensure* inequitability (Chambliss and Cutrara 2020). The pandemic demonstrated band-aid solutions or political conversations had in bad faith quickly become lost when other, more notable events are happening

(Carleton and Cutrara 2020). "It doesn't take long, does it?" Professor Nathan Smith (2020) asked, to reveal the "fault lines" and tensions that exist in society during a crisis. Or, as Professor John Bickford said, it does not take long for "the bedrock" to be "exposed. Like when a river digs underneath the ground and pulls up some sediment that hadn't been exposed in a while, like with a flood" (Bickford and Cutrara 2020).

Seeing greater inequities because of COVID was a conversation we had in almost every video, and many of these conversations were made more rich by drawing on history to understand our current moment. I spoke with Geoffrey Reaume, a prominent historian in the field of critical disability studies, who said that during the pandemic we were facing a moment of "social disablement" where issues of vulnerability and access became highlighted for all members of society. In this conversation, we discussed how looking at history through the lens of critical disability theory would allow us to better understand how to navigate this moment, but also, more crucially, rebuild a society that invites greater access, space for all abilities, and a society which does not create or augment vulnerabilities (Reaume and Cutrara 2020). In my conversation with feminist social studies education scholar Marie-Hélène Brunet, we spoke about child care inequities many women were experiencing, with Brunet demonstrating how popular iconographies of self-sacrificing women continue to shape the unequitable expectations society places on women to engage in free care work (Brunet and Cutrara 2020).

Following the global resurgence of Black Lives Matter protests in early June, many American scholars drew a line from the past to the present activism, and using it as an example about how widespread, group-based activism can not only make change but diverge from the inaccurate single-hero narratives often taught in schools (Duncan and Cutrara 2020b). However, even before these protests Canadian and American scholars were highlighting that many of the issues of inequity that most often affect Black people and other people of colour were advocated before COVID, things like prison reform (Aladejebi and Cutrara 2020) and anti-Black racism in schools (Henry and Cutrara 2020). COVID is

dangerous, but for Black people, "does [COVID] pose a greater danger than a systematic erasure of your person?", Professor Julian Chambliss asked. It does not, which is why thousands of people engaged in Black Lives Matter protest during the pandemic.

When asked, series participants quickly said that history teaching *should* change after COVID. As Professor Kristin Duncan said so succinctly, "if we go back to teaching history the way we did six months ago, we have wasted this moment." But we had fewer conversations about what this change would look like in our classrooms: Greater compassion for students (Eidinger and Cutrara 2020)? Teaching with more awareness of our lives as historical beings (Chaktsiris and Cutrara 2020)? Teaching with materials and stories closer to home (Currie and Cutrara 2020, Llewellyn and Cutrara 2020, Whitfield and Cutrara 2020)? Will teaching after/during COVID move away from teaching the historical method and closer to a more affective and personal exploration of the past (Sosu and Cutrara 2020, Stout and Cutrara 2020)? Or will it mean changes to method but not necessarily approach to content (Smith and Cutrara 2020)? Would a move to virtual invite us to use these technologies to bring us closer to one another rather than further apart (Stanley and Cutrara 2020)? And yet, if we had not used these valuable teaching tools before COVID, why would our panicked use of them during COVID result in transformative practice now (Kheraj and Cutrara 2020)?

In these conversations, I was especially inspired by those who worked in the field of public history who saw this as a crucial moment for making change to the narratives presented in sites of public history – museums, for example – at risk of losing audiences (Akerfeldt and Cutrara 2020, McGill and Cutrara 2020). When people spoke about public history there seemed to be a better plan or attempt at which types of changes were going to happen and how, rather than simply an acknowledgement that they should.

A key difference, however, in those public historians compared to educators in formal schooling systems, was that those public historians had greater autonomy to make change in their sites of

interpretation. Teaches and professors are beholden to the structures they teach within, and they felt the weight of these structures in thinking about their return. One teacher I spoke to in June, Mel Williams, had great ideas for bringing pandemic experiences into her history classroom, but had no knowledge of the teaching landscape she would be face in September or, as another teacher said, who the students will be in this new world (Duncan and Cutrara 2020a, Williams and Cutrara 2020). As we moved closer to the start of the school year, the structures of schooling began to creep further in our conversations in ways that seemed at odds for the possibilities for deconstructive justice that we started with.

In the next section, I will summarize the education experience for many North American educators returning to school for the 2020/2021 school year as a contrast to the experiences shared in the Pandemic Pedagogy video series.

Fall Perspectives

While many educators and scholars identified this as a moment *of* and *for* change, as we moved into the start of the 2020/2021 school year it became clear that change was not being addressed in the large-scale, systematic ways that was needed. When looking at popular conversations held in fall 2020,[5] the very things that many of us discussed in Pandemic Pedagogy were left behind in favour of more strict and rigid forms of interaction, pedagogy, and technological integration. Many of the conversations had on popular and social media seemed to suggest that many schools not only took possibilities for changes to education *out*, but also seemed to revert *back* to advocating for teaching and learning environments that were more "traditional": more rote than radical, more focused on teaching than on learning. The result was that many North American teachers have had an experience of the 2020/2021

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[5] Research for this section was completed in late-October and early-November of 2020 and consisted of reading articles published in advance of the school year and observing Twitter conversations about teachers' experiences returning to school. I specifically want to acknowledge the curated collection of resources regarding school reopening that has been collected by educator Larry Ferlazzo (2020).

school year as being beholden to a teaching structure that looked away from the deconstruction of our educational systems and the need for justice of the people within them.

Some of the elements that we discussed in our conversations, such as the importance of care for students over curricular achievement, were part of the strategies recommended by large national organizations such as Anxiety Canada (2020) before the school year began. However, these recommendations were provided along side equally important recommendations such as a focus on teacher self-care, boundary setting for off-hours communication, and providing families with clear and consistent information (AnxietyCanada 2020). These recommendations lived in relation with each other because only one could be achieved with the cooperation of the others. However, it was these other recommendations, the recommendations that required strategic, systematic change to how education could be organized that seemed *not* to be put in place by many schools and/or school boards in preparation for reopening. One study found that four out of five teachers said that government could have done a better job of "ensuring a safe and organized return to school" (Antle 2020).

A deep grief settled into empty, distanced, and remote classrooms this fall and the trauma of that cannot be underestimated (Chaves 2020, Kebede 2020, LaHayne 2020, Reilly 2020, TeachingTolerance 2020). Rather than start the school year with attention to this grief and vulnerability, many schools and school boards seemed to place their emphasis on physicality and technicalities of education, rather than on emotional needs of people in crisis. Emphasis was often on making changes to classrooms based on the physical distancing measures recommended by WHO (2020) and the CDC (2020). However, even with that focus, those guidelines were often not followed, with many teachers saying they were impossible to begin with (Wong 2020). Schools without adequate sanitation, ventilation, and learning space were not going to become safer for students because desks were organized as six feet apart. As one teacher said, the CDC guidelines are not "really feasible considering the lack of funding that we've had for a decade" (Reilly 2020).

Another focus was on technology as a save-all for remote and virtual teaching. This emphasis, again, was layered onto inequitable structures rather than responding to, and integrating with, the experiences and needs to people during COVID. Months into remote learning, both teachers (Ramos 2020) and students (Mahadevan 2020) were reported to still use publicly available wi-fi in places like fast food parking lots as a way to complete school work. Schools and school boards were often approaching the adoption of digital tools and technologies in ways that emphasized a long-term integration rather than as short-term assistance. One advocate wrote that this moment shows how "the education system needs to build e-learning ecosystems involving national and provincial governments, schools, teachers, parents, telecommunications companies, NGOs and the private sector." However, they continue, "teachers need to be *supported* and *trained* in digital education. These interventions should *look beyond the pandemic* as critical components enabling learning with technology in and beyond the classroom" (my emphasis Jantjies 2020), which was not happening.

In one state, 62% teachers said they were not provided with the training necessarily to teach in online and blended learning environments, despite the adoption of these technologies in their schools (SDEA 2020). Much of this work has resulted in the decrease in teacher self-efficacy, which could be preventative for teachers using these technologies in the future (Tennant 2019). As one teacher lamented: "I'm not an online teacher. I've not been trained to do any of this, and I don't want my students to be at a loss because I am in uncharted territory" (Reilly 2020). Teachers did not have time nor capacity to learn the teaching and learning potential of new tools, and their emphasis have felt more like a "demand" than a "resource" (Sokal, Babb, and Eblie Trudel 2020). One survey found that teachers were working an average of 12 additional hours per week on prep-time (McGrory 2020), or "90 percent more than a typical year," according to one teacher (Long 2020), because of the introduction of new digital tools and technologies. One global study of teachers during COVID have identified that regardless of which technologies they are using, "teachers need to adapt their practices and be creative to keep

students engaged as every household has become a classroom" (Barron 2021). Adaptability and creativity are two skills that teachers do well, but when there is so much pressure for these skills, in the middle of a global crisis, *and* no downtime for teachers to effectively practice them, *and* with technologies that can make the classroom open and available at all times, means that for many teachers their days are never done, with a litany of teaching, prepping, and student care work tasks on their minds at all time leading to extreme burnout (Tate 2021).

With an emphasis on space and technology, there seemed to be little opportunity for schools and schooling to respond to deconstructive justice following the COVID and BLM "events." In fact, the structure of schooling seemed to become more rigid, more closed off to radical and democratic ideas about what schooling could and should be doing. Derrida (1978, 278) writes that to make structures seem solid and legitimate, outside human hands and minds, structures are given a centre, a point of origin, designed to "orient, balance, and organize" the structure to seem like it is something beyond itself. This centre, or the *idea* of a fixed centre or origin point, is supposed to make the structure seem stable, outside the fallibility of human creation. With an emphasis on space and technology over people and care, the structure of schooling in the fall 2020 seemed to close in on itself and, rather invite deconstruction, moving closer to a fixed idea of a "traditional" vision of education that relies on direct-instruction, memorization, measurable-objectives, and regularity and authority (Miller and Seller 1990), where teachers and students are not full, complex individuals, but Teachers and Students with clear "curricular roles" to play (Cutrara 2020d, 147).

Teachers have reported that in returning to school they have felt more like a "technician" or a "a COVID rule-enforcer" than a caring and active teacher (Strauss 2020, Wong 2020). One teacher said that the type of schooling that was emphasized during COVID was "a reflection of all the things that were wrong with education before COVID hit" (Reilly 2020). Teaching time became a list of things to do (McGrory 2020), a "dry and institutionalized" experience where teachers have gone "back to standing in

front of the room and lecturing to kids who are sitting all in one direction" rather than collaborative and creative analytical explorations with each other and content (Reilly 2020). Rather than work with students through the bumps and explorations through new forms of teaching and learning, teachers have been facing a moving target where, according to one teacher "It's challenging to keep our focus on our students when we need to adjust to and absorb new and changing directives on what seems like a daily basis" (Long 2020).

Further, while the demands for content and structural change were more loudly emphasized during the BLM protest, many people, including young people, were aware that anti-racism work would take a backseat to COVID when school returned (Elghawaby 2020). Black and Latino parents overwhelming preferred for their children to stay home and learn virtually because it could shield their children from anti-Black bias, control their exposure to racial microaggressions, and an circumvent structures, such as programs placing police-like "resource officers" in schools that support the school-to-prison pipeline (Anderson 2020). But of course, virtual/remote education are not exempt from structural inequities. Virtual learning has become coded with anti-Black racism as well, with Black students and students of colour policed on things like attendance, dress code, and attention levels (Belsha 2020, Cohen 2020, Hegarty 2020, Kebede 2020, Retta 2020, Whitehead 2020, Washington 2020).

Compounded with this, top-down school systems designed *for* people, rather than grassroots schools created *with* people, have meant that many schools have not been able to return in ways that are responsive to the needs of the communities they serve. Other studies have shown that Black and Latino parents are more reticent to send their children back to school because of concerns related to lack of health insurance, multi-generational households, and working in industries with higher cases of COVID (Harris 2020a, McNeel 2020). Many parents have started turned their back on the idea of public school and have been looking for alternatives (Black, Ferdig, and Thompson 2020), such as homeschooling (Green 2020), road schooling (Warnick 2020), unschooling (Ingram 2020). Some of these

options are directly related to providing a learning experience for one's child that is more in line with

ensuring one's child learns cultural values and content that become "optional" when there is a "back-to-

basics" approach to education; the curtailing of Afro-centric curriculum during COVID is one such

example (Henry and Cutrara 2020). Other options exacerbate class-based inequities with the creation of,

what some refer to as, elitist "pods" (Berman 2020, Yang and Kennedy 2020, Zimmerman 2020), where

a small group of families pay out of pocket for a teacher to provide direct instruction to their children.

These pods provide a cultural education of a different sort; one premised on exclusivity and taking care

of some over others. While not all learning pods have high costs associated with them (Rush 2020), the

move to pod-based learning as a response to the bumpy return to public school in fall 2020 will

exacerbate the lack of investment in public education in ways that will have far reaching impacts beyond

COVID (Freitag 2020, Harris 2020b, Keates 2020, SDEA 2020, Way 2020, Winton 2020). The structural

ineptness of the return to school during COVID has some suggesting that we have laid the groundwork

for a generation left behind (Esquivel et al. 2020), with the very students who education would have

always been easy, having the resources to succeed and the ones who always had to struggle pushed

further and further behind.

As I have written elsewhere, if schools are not places of meaningful teaching they cannot be

places of meaningful learning (Cutrara 2020d), and schools this year were not set up with the affective,

meaningful investment in physical, psychological, and emotional wellbeing of teachers, students,

parents, and others who work in schools, as they could have been (Mulqueen 2020), as we wanted in

our Pandemic Pedagogy conversations. Higher education specialist Cathy Davidson (2020) has written

that "single most essential requirement in designing a fall online course" is a focus on the student and

what they need now, and yet this has not been the experience of most educators at the start of the

school year. The remedy of teaching in COVID times has seemed to be to *further* the physical and

emotional connection between teacher and student, not bring together in times of crisis. Teachers gain

personal and professional satisfaction from their daily interactions with their students (Shkedi 1997, 66),

but teachers are being further isolated from these experiences in the most common approaches to this

school year. At the end of October, a nation-wide Canadian survey found that teachers were stressed

and overwhelmed, with a third of the respondents considering leaving the profession (Reilly 2020). This

number aligns with a report the 28% of American teachers who have also said that they were more

likely to retire early or leave the profession (Flannery 2020), although the follow through may be lower

than initial predictions suggest (Aspegren 2020).

With the structures deconstructing through these unprecedented "events," how do we *witness*,

and act, in ways that can bring about justice? How do we ensure we are not leaving our teachers and

our students behind? How do we court the spirit of change and justice in ways that will bring about real

transformation in our schooling systems? And, if not this moment, then when?

2021 and Beyond

With conversations in spring 2020 showing fear, but also possibility, and fall 2020 showing a

return to the rigidity of teaching and learning structures that do not invite radical possibilities, I question

how large-scale educational change – changes focused on students and equity, care for teachers and

respect for their work – happens? Is the "when" to come? Are we too early? Are we too deep in crisis?

Are we just patching over this moment to ensure some sort of education is happening, but we will see

the changes come in 5 or 10 years? Is this wait good enough?

Derrida's work on structure, deconstruction, and justice is again helpful here, especially as it

relates to an "event." An event is not just something happening, Derrida says. It is the future, a future

that is unanticipated, a future premised on an experience of the Other (Derrida et al. 1994, 32). It is

something that clashes with established structures. It is "messianic," Derrida (1994) says, but perhaps it

is not heavenly.

Derrida, for example, does not write about how the structure and its centre provides safety, especially in the face of rupture; or that there is trauma in revolution, even when it brings justice. The centre holds when we fail to see otherwise, but sometimes focusing on the centre allows us to get our bearings in a sea of unexpected change.

When viewed in this way, is it a surprise that there is a (re)turn to structure and control in our school spaces when schools are responsible for thousands of potential carriers of a deadly virus? Is it a surprise that schooling systems that were never created or resourced to be an equal and equitable experience, continue not to be equal and equitable?

It both is, and is not, a surprise in both these cases; and this surprise, this continued surprise *despite* us knowing it should not be a surprise, is further evidence of this event and the deconstructive witnessing we are doing because of it. It is further evidence of how we are coming to understand the Other within our structures that have been absented in favour of keeping the structures (seem) whole and sound. The centre cannot in fact hold when we look toward the Other and work toward justice for them, for us, when doing so. As Derrida (et al. 1994, 36) says: "The openness of the future is worth more than this: that is the axiom of deconstruction – the basis on which it has always set itself in motion, and which links it, like the future itself, to Otherness, to the priceless dignity of Otherness, that is to say to justice."

Derrida does acknowledge the fear of returning to the "worst" after an "event" – which perhaps is our fear right now. But, Derrida continues, if we were to "return" to the "worst," it will not be the "worst" we imagine or the "worst" from before because we are in a different place now than we were then. In other words, some actions or ideas may be repeated, but they would be in a different context. We cannot step in the same river twice. We can, and have, created different conditions for "the worst" to exist because our response to what we believed the worst was before. This, too, can be a form of justice, but also a source of injustice. As Derrida (et al. 1994, 37) writes: "The moment at which the

worst threatens to return is also the moment when the worst is being remembered (out of respect for memory, for truth, for victims, etc.)." Things could certainly be worse than it was before, but "the return of a ghost is always a different return, on another stage; it takes place under new conditions, which we must study with as closely as possible" (Derrida et al. 1994, 38). Rather than just looking back in fear, we can look forward to a renewed, studied, sense of what may be to come.

In this way, we can see the return to school in fall 2020 as bringing out the worst in education – space and technology before people; need for direct-instruction, memorization, and measurable-objectives over exploration; increased in regularity and authority over flexibility – but we are in a different place than we were when these aspects of education were being defined and instituted into the structure we now recognize as a "traditional" approach to education, and can respond to this appeal to tradition with the new sense of deconstruction we are witnessing. In other words, we have witnessed deconstruction through the COVID/BLM events, but we have *also* witnessed deconstruction through the multitude of mini-events over decades that have made incremental changes to more just approaches to teaching, learning, assessment, evaluation, and student-teacher relations. Moving to the future, we can build off the changes we were making, and the changes we know can be made, because the deconstruction through the pandemic and BLM have opened us up to new levels of experiencing and seeing vulnerability in ways that call for the changes we were working for before. This notion of vulnerability in our educational spaces can help us engage in greater actions of justice in the spaces we interact in/with by building off the ways we visioned justice before, as well as during.

I think a key theme in our spring Pandemic Pedagogy conversations was our desire to put *people* back into our conception of structures: To be able to see and hear more stories and experiences in our archives and teaching materials; to acknowledge change makers and survivors when we are teaching about inequities; to see our students as complex individuals for whom a traditional approach to rote

teaching and assessment will not work; to witness the Other, the specters of what we have lost by focusing on a structure that was not designed for the majority to begin with.

I think as we moved closer to the start of the school year, that emphasis on peoples' diverse, emotional, and vulnerable lives moved further away from what we could imagine because the structure of school and schooling loomed so large: How will capital-S Schools protect us – teachers, students, staff, parents, community members – from contracting a virus? *This* was the question posed by society rather than: How do we *take care* of our populations during this vulnerable and scary time? To respond to the second question would require us to believe that the structures of schooling ever had the capacity to care or to address vulnerability, and we know this is not how popular schooling systems have been set up. We know this as our experience as educators, as parents, and as students. Thus, we had to return to orienting ourselves in the structure(s) we work and teach in, knowing that these structures were unjust, knowing the violence they were perpetrating, but we still have to find space for justice and revolution within the cracks we know are there.

Derrida writes that structures are given an imaginary centre to orient, balance, and organize the structure; but this centre also "limit[s] what we might call the *play* of the structure" (Derrida 1978, 278 emphasis in original). "Playing" with a structure involves shaking it about to see it as a fallible human creation instead of its solid whole. "Play" is demonstration that there is no fixed and solid centre. It is a "disruption of presence." It is speaking to a structure's deconstruction. It is pushing back against what is, to expose more of what can be. It is "a play of absence and presence" (Derrida 1978, 292).

Think of, for example, how many times the phrase "this is how we have always done it" is used when a new, innovative idea is presented. This new idea is meant to bring out different experiences and change the expected outcome for future experiences, but "this is how we have always done it" keeps the behaviour/experience within an established system and does so by appealing to a sense of historical reverence. If you go back and back and back to trace how long "always" is, you will find more and more

examples of challenges to this structure, and the barriers put in place to make it seem like the structure was inalienable. This is ratifying the centre of the structure; insinuating its history is so long that it is natural, inevitable.

"Playing" with the structure is doing the new idea anyway. It is about presenting a history that does not assume structural inevitability. It is speaking to the agency we have in structures, because structures were created by humans just like us, and we can create new ways of interacting in our world. That is justice. That is play. We engaged in "play" in our spring 2020 Pandemic Pedagogy conversations because we were in shock of the event. We were able to deconstruct and speak to the revolution we wanted. But in returning to schools in fall 2020, we were returning to the structure and thus found less space for play; this is by design: "the centre of a structure permits the play of its elements inside the total form," writes Derrida (1978, 279).

Few of us have control over schools, school boards/districts, states/provinces, and federal approaches to education in ways that can (seem to) make and sustain lasting structural influence, but we do have control over our ability to witness the Other and to "play" in ways that are different than what the structures invite. And the more we deconstruct and play, the more change we can make. How often do we trap ourselves in the structure and/or state that "this is how we always have done it"? How often to we act from places of comfort and stability rather than places of justice – even when we want to work for justice? We have these event(s) – COVID and BLM – we can witness deconstruction and see how and where justice is needed for the Other and ourselves. But we also have to commit to the ongoing work and understand how we ratify the systems we are in and how we can better "play" with/in them.

bell hooks (2003) writes that teaching well is about service and caring; but that service is often understood as being service *to* an institution rather than service *for* people, because caring and caring professions are devalued in our society. Care and service to and for our students, and ourselves, often

become lost within educational systems and how we practice in those systems. Teaching for service and care for students is difficult, sometimes impossible, because it is a "counter-hegemonic liberatory practice taking place within a dominator context" (hooks 2003, 89). We can rage against that system and the structures that bind us, but are we actively working to disrupt, challenge, and change these systems? If the rage is the extent of our work, and we do not change our practices, then we remain complicit in a system we recognize is not working.

To move forward after the events of the pandemic and BLM, we need to foreground an ethic and pedagogy of care toward the Other; but to see this through, to make change, to court revolution, we also have to engage in the *politics* of affect, the politics of caring, the politics of seeing and hearing the Other to make greater space for them.[6] The work of deconstruction is often thought of as an apolitical tearing apart, but Derrida's articulation of deconstruction is an ethico-political commitment to the Other and justice. How are we enacting those commitments in our work? Are we, for example, just trying our best to modify our teaching and learning practices to our current physically distanced and/or remote and/or tech-assisted context, or are we throwing out the book of what may have worked in a pre-COVID world (or "worked" because it was the way we always had done it) and creating new practices of teaching and learning that best support ourselves, our students, and this current emergency context in which we are in? As political events in the US the first two weeks of January has shown, we are moving into increasingly unpredictable and uncertain times, and we will need more tools to preface care and the needs of the Other, especially our students, in our classrooms. How can we (re)craft education – in small ways, in ways we can be in control of – that puts people over structures and create greater justice for the Other?

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[6] To make space for Others, but to also make space for the Other in us. The "shadow self" of doubt that often haunts our teaching. How can we show up as our full, but also broken or in-becoming, selves who shares their fears and follies with our students in ways that create a more honest community of learning and teaching?

While I may seem to be talking about generalities in this paper, this conception of creating a more just education during/post-event is very keenly imagined within the space of history and social studies classrooms. In these classrooms, we interact with the structures of schooling, but also of dominant culture(s) of history, civics, and geography; we are constrained by school rules and regulations but also the rules and regulations of the history discipline and archival practice; we can tell/explore/inquire into stories that keep our understanding of the work within a set place, or we can encourage our students to "play" with stories, to deconstruct events, to witness the Other and use this witnessing for justice (Cutrara 2020d). We can, in fact, "play" with the structures of schooling through history and social studies education in ways perhaps not available to us in Other disciplines, because it is through history and social studies education where we can teach through the myths of solid, stable, structures. We can deconstruct with our students and demonstrate how "always" has had to keep people and experiences out. We can start with the Other in our history and social studies classrooms and lay the ground for revolution that honours these voices. This is a unique element of history and social studies education and one we have to honour with our practices along with our pedagogies.

How do we teach history after this? Deconstruction toward justice may be a start.

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