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School sites and the haunting of history: unmasking the past in field-based research

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ABSTRACT

In field-based research, masking practices, as well as the general practice of relegating historical context to abstracted ‘site descriptions’ in a paper’s methodology section, can produce a tacit inattention to historical specificity. By juxtaposing two case studies of schools, this article examines the ways school sites are haunted by histories—that is, how the past is revived and revised in the present, and in turn what this means for field-based qualitative inquiry. Pairing archival and field-based methods, we trace how the haunting of history animated the present-day practices of stakeholders in two schools. In doing so, we show how history itself became an actor in these sites—as something administrators and teachers put to work in their approaches to schooling—and suggest expanding views of unmasking within qualitative inquiry that allow for these ghosts of the past to announce themselves more openly.

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History, as nearly no one seems to know, is not merely something to be read. And it does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do.

James Baldwin (1998)

We begin with these words from James Baldwin because they attest to the clear, if tenuous, relationship between past and present that we wish to explore in this article. What Baldwin identified in 1965 as a matter of ignorance—what ‘no one seems to know’—appears, today, only possible through studied and cultivated forgetting. In the half-century since Baldwin’s writing, the enduring force of ‘the then’ in ‘the now’ has been recurrently and irrefutably demonstrated not just through historical analysis in the academy, but in the lived legacies and fugitive archives of the movements that inform such work (Dixon, 2014; Moten & Harney, 2013; Taylor, 2016). In education research, scholars have shown how historical formations of difference persist in the policies and practices that structure and govern teaching and learning (e.g. Anderson, 1987; Katz, 1975; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). And in research articles, it is not uncommon for emergent findings to be interpreted in light of the histories they reproduce, resist, or imagine anew. There is, in other words, a recognition of the ‘unconscious control’ that the past holds on the present—as something not just ‘read’, but embodied, contested, and lived.

And yet, this recognition has not yielded consistent methods for bringing historical inquiry into field-based research. While scholars regularly identify the past resonances of particular

events and practices, such ‘histories’ tend to operate as a backdrop: providing context to a study or its findings without, themselves, being central to the overarching inquiry (Placier, 1998). There are several potential reasons for this. For one, historical methods may be absent in the training of educational researchers (Green & Cormack, 2015). But also, there are times when historical specificity can run counter to the ethical norms that researchers use to anonymize sites in field-based qualitative studies (Nespor, 2000). Instead, scholars, as most commonly practiced, might refer to a site as, for instance, ‘a school in a large urban district in the U.S. Northeast’—a label that preserves anonymity, to be sure, but that also elides the histories at work in its present conditions (e.g. the population served; its relationship with surrounding neighborhoods). Such masking practices, which may lead to the relegation of history to abstracted ‘site descriptions’ in a paper’s methodology section or ‘contextualization’ of its findings, call attention away from historical specificity, evinced in the gulf that exists between a given site’s generic, anonymized description and the contingencies of its unfolding material past.

Such was the quandary that we, the authors, found within our respective studies of two schools in ‘large urban districts in the U.S. Northeast’. With each invocation of this phrase in manuscripts and presentations, we managed to preserve the anonymity of our contexts; yet, in our work we also gestured toward the absent presence of their pasts: the people, practices, and circumstances that, over time, constituted each school as such—and that continue to inflect its present. We have wrestled with how to reconcile the impulses to historicize and anonymize, wondering, with other scholars (Jerolmack & Murphy, 2019; Nespor, 2000), whether it is more than ‘identification’ that conventional masking practices in qualitative research keep hidden. And in efforts to do ethical and equitable scholarship, we have wondered: how might inattention to historical specificity in sites of research perpetuate the very injustices and silences that we seek to identify, critique, or upend?

In this article, we take up these questions by retracing how our respective site-based studies in present-day schools became entangled with the haunting presence of the past, and interrogating the conceptual and methodological challenges that have surfaced in our efforts to unmask these histories in analyzing and writing up our research. We begin by situating our inquiry in literatures that have theorized the imbrication of past and present, particularly those who have conceptualized such relations as a form of ‘haunting’. We then map the process by which we were pulled into the distributed archive of our research sites, and how these histories helped to clarify the relations unfolding in the observable activities of each school. In doing so, we suggest that conventions of masking in qualitative research warrant more consideration as to what, exactly, is obscured when the imperative of de-identification unmoors research sites from material histories of places, communities, and cities. We conclude by outlining the implications as such processes render certain pasts usable or unusable as resources for imagining futures still to come—in research, pedagogy, and social action.

Historical hauntings

The past in the present

A range of theoretical traditions have examined the work of history in animating the present. It is central to Indigenous scholarship that explores how notions of ‘place’ cannot be understood apart from their historical ties to land and occupation (Nxumalo, 2019). Tuck and McKenzie (2015) suggest that the emphasis of qualitative research on the social construction of ‘place’—the discourses and practices observable in research sites—can lead to a disregard for such histories. In response, they assert the need for inquiry attuned to the ontology of place as something ‘shifting over time and space and through interactions with flows of people, other species, social practices’ (p. 3). The present viewed as a living palimpsest of historical currents also parallels Derrida’s (1994) coinage of *hauntology*—a portmanteau of ‘haunt’ and ‘ontology’—an

understanding of being as something haunted by ‘absent presences’ that are *no longer* yet also, paradoxically, *not yet*. What we observe of people, places, and practices are never as dense and solid as they appear; they are perpetually ‘unfinished’, an intermingling of then and now. Sociologist Avery Gordon (1997) builds on this conceptualization, arguing that the work of these ghosts ought to impel researchers ‘neither to memorialize nor to slay, but to follow where they lead’ (p. 57).

Within education research, a growing literature has taken up this call, pursuing those specters whose absent presence stains the everyday unfolding of schooling, teaching, and learning. Johnson (2017) theorizes ‘racial haunting’ as a mode of self-reflection, exploring how unfinished relations of past, present, and future (raced and gendered) selves drive pedagogical and methodological decisions in classrooms. This perspective resonates with scholars who, though they may not use the language of ‘haunting’, similarly, exhume the historical formations of difference embedded in the quotidian practices of qualitative research (Paris & Winn, 2013; Patel, 2015) and classroom instruction (Dixon-Roman, Nichols, & Nyame-Mensah, 2020; Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013). Dixon-Román (2017) goes further still, arguing it is not only pedagogies and research methods that inherit ghosts from the past, but also conceptions of ‘data’ itself. In his words, ‘there is always already an excess, a beyond, a mutually constituted exclusion, an unconscious history of data’ (p. 45).

Such notions of ‘haunting’ extend Baldwin’s theory of history, highlighting not just the ‘unconscious control’ that emanates from the past, but also the flickering instability of the present. In Jameson’s (1999) phrasing, a hauntological orientation is attuned to the ways ‘the living present is scarcely as self-sufficient as it claims to be’ (p. 39). For qualitative researchers, this suggests a need both for reflexivity with regard to methods and tools of inquiry, and even more, for a willingness to follow the ghosts we encounter in such examinations, even (and perhaps especially) when they take us afield from our immediate and delimited sites of study.

The present in the past

To willingly reckon with historical hauntings is not to suggest, however, that history does not already appear in the present in myriad ways. Often, histories are called upon by actors to make sense of their present, yet these histories are mediated by erasures and distortions, as the present is apt to subjugate historical memory and, perhaps, overshadow the hauntings. In this section, we explore common ways in which site histories are made *usable* or *unusable* through these competing ‘modalities’ of nostalgia (Pickering & Keightley, 2006).

When history is called into the present, it is often through a ‘restorative nostalgia’ (Lasch, 1991) that functions as a statement of critique, or a denigration of the present. Restorative nostalgia is susceptible to distortions, using history selectively to curate remembrance and, at times, nationalistic tendencies (see Boym, 2001). However, a ‘reflective nostalgia’ is one that may critically engage with the past, using it to productively confront trauma, loss, and change (Boym, 2001), or as a means to confront the present through its past so as to not forget. Zembylas (2014), for instance, details the use of reflective nostalgia by refugees as a means to cultivate ‘postmemories’ or traumas of previous generations. The result is more than a longing for a lost past, but the recognition that such histories are still acting on the present.

We can see both modes of nostalgia exemplified in HBO’s recent adaptation of the graphic novel *Watchmen* ((Lindelof et al., 2019). In it, a pharmaceutical drug for dementia, named Nostalgia, converts a patient’s harvested memories into tablets, allowing them to reexperience chosen moments in their past. When recreational usage spreads, concerns about the dangers of unchecked restorative nostalgia, to ‘live in the past’ uncritically, force the drug’s recall. In the series’ most lauded episode, Angela, a Black police officer in an alternate version of Tulsa, Oklahoma, where cops wear masks to conceal their identity, ingests a bottle of Nostalgia pills belonging to her estranged grandfather. The episode proceeds as an immersive journey through

his life as a survivor of actual historical traumas—Black Wall Street, Klan lynchings, and police brutality – which supply his origin story as the first masked crusader, Hooded Justice. As the boundaries between their respective memories become blurred, apparitions from one trauma appearing in another, the show explores how generational trauma continues to haunt her present. But also, it subverts the restorative nostalgia of (white) superhero origin stories by invoking actual hauntings of vigilante justice in American history, bearing witness to who, historically, has donned masks, and whose justice was restored in their crusades. These ghosts represent ‘the passive acceptance of white objectivity’ (Nadia-McDonald, 2019) in these stories, and through reexperiencing them in the grandfather’s superhero origin story, they are unmasked.

What this illustrates is, in contrast to the masking potential of nostalgia, is the unmasking power of ghost stories (Jones, 2001), as ‘nostalgia claims that the past does not persist in the present, and [ghost] stories such as these surely suggest that the past and the present are forever intermingled’ (p. 378). Such is the imperative to acknowledging how unchecked nostalgic readings of the past may keep the ghosts of our research sites, and their lingering traumas, masked from analysis in our present. ‘These ghosts’, Ewing argues, ‘are stewards of lives marked by mourning: mourning those lost to the many forms of violence this country has invented to kill us’ (2018, p. 126). As qualitative researchers, these words expose our agency in how these stories are heard, beginning with the story that is told around our given sites of inquiry. We worry that masking sites from their pasts, intending to make them more narrowly discernable and knowable, may also elide the invisible ways that ghosts continue to work on, in, and through the present as mourning or inherited trauma. As a matter of ethics, then, ghosts deserve our respect as they allow us as researchers to ‘see anew’ (Dernikos, Ferguson, & Siegel, 2020) the ways the past still incurs trauma on present actors. Or, as Angela’s grandfather tells her after she’s relived his past traumas, ‘you can’t heal under a mask, wounds need air’.

To be clear, we offer this interpretation of unmasking not in contention of all masking practices. We agree with other scholars (Jerolmack & Murphy, 2019) that masking in qualitative research, while flawed at times, can be useful and necessary. Our particular focus here is, in fact, not as concerned with the masking of individual participants and schools than with the masking of the larger histories that animate our field sites. Thus, we are approaching unmasking by seeking out methods that aim to prevent harm from masking over any historical traumas and other wounds of injustice, which are still ‘literally present’ (Baldwin, 1965).

Methods of (un)masking the past

As we have suggested, a range of rich, intellectual traditions have made profound contributions in theorizing, exhuming, and examining the hauntings of history in the unfolding present. This has been a powerful current in postcolonial studies, where scholars have labored to reconstruct subaltern histories, excised from settler archives and the documentation practices of metropolises, through the distributed archives of material artifacts, cultural legacies, and collective memory and narration (Lowe, 2015). Such methods share resonance with theorizations in Caribbean Studies and Black Studies—Édouard Glissant’s (1989) ‘poetics of landscape’, Katherine McKittrick’s (2006) ‘demonic grounds’, Christina Sharpe’s (2016) ‘wake work’—which are oriented toward the excavation of Black historical memory, trauma, desire, resistance, and imagination from the transparent surroundings of the present, and rely, too, on the traces of provisional and distributed archives. Consider, for instance, the distributed archive utilized in Saidiya Hartman’s *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (2018), comprised of photos, trial transcripts, prison case files, and reports of social workers and vice investigators to reconstitute the imagery, intimacy, and kinship of Black life in New York and Philadelphia in the early twentieth century.

Importantly, it is through such examples that the stakes of historical masking begin to crystallize. Because the present is inextricably linked to the past, there are always absent presences in sites and data; and qualitative researchers can hardly be faulted for failing to articulate the

totality of these histories in a given study (if such a feat were even possible). But crucially, the weight and implications of these hauntings does not fall evenly on such sites, or those associated with them. Some ghosts may flicker faintly in the background, as an apparition in a photograph; yet others are deeply tied to personal or collective trauma or institutional mourning (cf. Ewing, 2018).

As directly stated by Dionne Brand, 'Black experience in any modern city or town in the Americas is a haunting. One enters a room and history follows; one enters a room and history precedes... Where one stands in society seems always related to this historical experience' (2002, p. 24). As two white male scholars, we draw on Black Studies scholarship here to reorient our gaze to such hauntings, but do so cautiously, recognizing the inequitable perception of weight to history, and the advantage of whiteness as a perceived invisibility (Ahmed, 2004; Leonardo, 2002) to such historical weight. In our work, we have wrestled with what it means to be attuned to the hauntings of history, while understanding that its stakes and weight do not immediately fall as heavily or in the same manner on us as they do those with whom we work, and those whose work has shaped our thinking. One way we have grappled with this friction is to recognize a third modality of nostalgia, where histories may be used to appease a present sense of white or colonial guilt, or as Sara Ahmed describes, 'an impulse to reconciliation as a 're-recovering' of the past' (2004, p. 56). This amounts to a reflective nostalgia that, rather than unmasking a historical wound, uses history to recenter whiteness in the present, acknowledging and rehearsing complicity in past colonial injustices without altering the reproduction of those conditions in the present (Cameron, 2008). Identifying and naming this mode of nostalgia offers an effective, if imperfect, aid for resisting its draw.

Additionally, the norms of field-based research that prioritize the unfolding activities of the present can also condition a tacit inattention to those moments when specters of history announce themselves, as is the case, we argue, in the convention of site masking. Anonymizing a research site may, at times, obscure the material histories of those spaces, communities, and practices from critical reflection or analysis. There are moments, in other words, when we wonder whether the masking of a site may sever it from context in ways that work against the call of, for instance, Critical Race Theorists for 'unmasking and exposing racism in its various permutations' (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 11). Whiteness, as it travels through research sites, and the research process, also may act as a deterrent to unmasking in its attempts to ignore, cover, or evade the historical experiences hidden *in plain site*. Our concern, in other words, is that when 'history' is relegated to a generic description in a paper's methodology section, and 'sites' are abstracted from the places that constitute them, or the researchers describing them, then it is possible that masking practices conceal more than the identities of people and places. Indeed, they may also paper over legacies of trauma, desire, and resistance that not only clarify the conditions of the present but also render these pasts *usable* in new imaginings for futures still to come.

Navigating the distributed archive

In lieu of a conventional explication of methods and findings, we retrace our experiences in two field-based research projects in order to draw out the living histories that haunted these school sites. The first was a one-year case study in a New York public elementary school returning to its century-old roots in 'progressive education;' the second, a three-year ethnography in a Philadelphia public high school that was part of the district's 'innovation' initiative. For each of these studies, the initial research design did not include an emphasis on historical methods; and yet, there were flickering instabilities in what we observed that continually pulled us into contact with the distributed archives of these sites: from formal documentation of policies, news clippings, and correspondences to unwritten histories of domination and resistance in the

neighborhood, community, and city. Below, we explore these absent presences, before turning to the processes by which we worked to address them in our field-based research, and the challenges we faced in unmasking the past of each school site.

New York, 2016–17

In the 2016–2017 school year, I (Daniel) began a study looking at the curriculum enacted in one Kindergarten classroom at Parkside Elementary (pseudonym), when the school was in the middle of reforming its curriculum and school philosophy towards ‘progressive education’, Pre-K through 5th grade, by the year 2020. Here is how the school explained the change to their mission statement in one document:

Parkside pre-kindergarten parents have spoken about the extreme differences between the philosophy of teaching in pre-kindergarten and what happens when a child graduates to kindergarten. The pre-kindergarten families shared how they wished for a whole-school environment that was more aligned to the philosophy of pre-kindergarten. In addition, parents that are new to the district and the school’s zone also expressed their desire for a school that embraces more progressive practices.

The Pre-K children of families referenced in this statement, described as ‘new to the district,’ were taught by Clare, the Kindergarten teacher whose class I researched during the 2016-17 school year, and whose classroom was centrally rooted in the larger movement for progressive education in the school. These parents had first lobbied the school administration for Clare to loop up with their children to Kindergarten, continuing the kind of inquiry-based indoor-outdoor learning that Clare had become well known for as a preschool teacher. By 2016, Clare was teaching her second class in Kindergarten with new children, and the school was officially pursuing efforts to expand progressive education practices schoolwide.

My initial interest in studying enacted curriculum came from witnessing recurring cycles of curriculum reform across the city, most recently from the rise, and stagnation, of aligning curriculum and testing citywide to Common Core Standards. By focusing on classroom materials, I intended to show through material inventories, classroom observations, document analyses and teacher interviews how these cycles of reform left lingering traces in the materiality of the classroom. In a previous research site, this was exemplified in the stacks of curriculum materials, one program atop another atop another, found in Kindergarten classrooms. In Clare’s classroom, however, pruned trees and other found objects from a nearby park circulated in and through the space, spurring inquiry units around trees, recycling, paper, and gardening, while official curricular texts remained in the classroom closet, still wrapped in plastic at the end of the year.

As I spent more time with Clare’s class, however, larger channels of actors appeared within curricular enactments, such as the flexible school-choice policies and increasing neighborhood gentrification that led parents to enroll their children in this particular school. From a report where researchers mapped the disparities between housing and schooling across NYC (Hemphill & Mader, 2016), I learned that in the school year preceding Parkside’s progressive curriculum reform, high percentages of children living within the school’s zone and district attended school elsewhere. As a result, Parkside’s dangerously low enrollment at the time was also disproportionately Black and Latinx, as well as lower income, than neighborhood averages. Thus, Parkside’s student body did not reflect the demographic shifts of its heavily gentrified neighborhood because many of those families utilized school choice policies to attend schools elsewhere. However, after Parkside announced its return towards progressive education, its low enrollment grew by 33%, while its district where only half of the neighborhood school age children attended their local school lost 12% in the same time frame.

Through these movements of student bodies via the school choice program, parents were also constituted in enacting progressive curriculum by keeping the school’s enrollment high enough to stay open, while simultaneously shaping the school in other ways. The school’s economic index also began to decrease, putting the school at risk for losing Title 1 funds, and white

students in particular were the most rapidly growing demographic, increasing three-fold over a four-year period.

Here is where my analysis would have stopped, if not for a Saturday drawn into a wormhole of searching through archives for references to Parkside. I was just loaned a binder labeled 'school history' of documents providing a scant trace of the school's background. Seeking more context, I searched through multiple newspaper archives for the school's name. I also used the internet archive, Wayback Machine, to forage for older versions of official documents, such as Comprehensive Education Plans, Quality Reviews, and Progress Reports, updated yearly on New York City's Department of Education page. These, dating as far back as 2008, revealed more occurrences of school curriculum changes and amended school mission statements over the past ten years.

What I found was that the school had a much more documented history than I or anyone I spoke to at the school knew. Although vaguely detailed, the school history binder had one document about the original school building, built a century prior as an experimental education campus affiliated and partially funded by a nearby university whereby several progressive education scholars facilitated and researched curricular practices with its students and teachers. This lasted about 20 years until, in the 1940s, the university sold the building to the New York City Public School System, and its name was changed. However, as revealed in the newspaper archives, the school went through other significant cycles of reform regarding its identity, influencing school-wide curricular changes in the process, and at the center of those movements, too, were parent groups influencing their outcome, and the fate of the school.

Philadelphia, 2014–2017

For Phil the pull toward historical research involved the accidental convergence of two separate projects. In 2014, following several years of devastating budget cuts, layoffs, and school closures, the School District of Philadelphia faced increasing public pressure to offer accessible alternatives to the selective charter and magnet programs opening across the city. In a response that local journalists termed 'The Innovation Gamble', the superintendent announced that the district would open a handful of 'innovation high schools'—which would bring technology-rich, project-based learning to students who might be excluded from similar programs due to geography, enrollment caps, or past academic performance. In the months before the opening of one such school, which we are calling The Innovation School, I was asked to manage a university-school research partnership which would follow the first two cohorts of students from the start of their 9th grade year through graduation. In this role, I led a team of graduate and undergraduate students in providing classroom support to teachers and students while also documenting the challenges and opportunities that surfaced as educators introduced 'innovative' programs in otherwise austere district conditions.

At the same time as I was managing this partnership, I was completing a degree in History & Sociology of Science, where the wider discourse of 'innovation'—which permeated not just Philadelphia schools, but also federal science and education policy, Silicon Valley venture capitalism, and folk economic theory—had become a focus of my historical research. I was interested in the emergence of 'innovation' as a Cold War political project—one intended to advance the interests of American liberalism through massive federal subsidies for military-industrial-academic research and development. It was while following an archival lead to better understand how these dynamics impacted everyday life in U.S. cities that I became aware of one federal initiative, the Educational System for the 1970s (ES-70), that funneled money to school districts and universities to develop more 'innovative' schools (i.e. those that would integrate expert-designed curricula, audio-visual technologies, and experiential learning). Philadelphia, one of the participating cities, used this program to fund the construction of a new high school—the first it could afford to build since World War II—and subsequently opened its own Office of Innovation to encourage

further experiments with school configurations (e.g. community schools, schools-within-schools, schools-without-walls, open classrooms).

Finding information about the ES-70 program, and the school district of Philadelphia's experiments with 'innovation' in the 1960s, was not easy. Education historians have long noted the challenges of studying the lived experiences of schools, given the transience of classroom life and the turn-over of teachers, students, curricula, and polices (Cuban, 1993). This challenge is exacerbated when the thread being followed is even less durable than a school: like an idea ('innovation') manifested in an experimental initiative fifty-years prior. Even the federal paper-work associated with the ES-70 project offered few leads; the final report, which celebrated the program's success in implementing 'innovative' education across 20 U.S. districts, was filed in 1970—a year before Philadelphia's innovative school, University City High School, even opened. Rather than seeking out an institutional history, then, I turned instead to the people and communities involved both in planning and contesting the new school. This included the documents and correspondences of school board members and local corporations related to the school's construction; as well as the meeting minutes and personal papers of union leaders, education journalists, and community organizations (e.g. Black activist collectives, neighborhood associations, education advocacy groups, and the local NAACP). These materials also yielded the names of several teachers, administrators, and community organizers who were involved in the program—some of whom were still living, and willing to participate in oral history interviews to fill in gaps in the narrative that was emerging.

In sifting through archives to piece together the story of the ES70 initiative in Philadelphia, a connecting thread between past and present began to emerge. It was not only that there were parallels between the 'innovation' schools of then and now (though there were striking similarities: both narrated themselves as 'student-centered' and distinct from the 'factory-like' conditions of other schools; both encouraged asynchronous learning using audio-visual technologies; both assessed students using 'competencies' rather than traditional grades). But more notably, they were both upshots of a powerful and persuasive discourse of 'innovation' that was invoked, in different times and for different purposes, to address particular political problems. In other words, what was happening in the day-to-day practices of the university-school partnership that I was managing were not just bounded to the here-and-now, but were part of a half-century-long history of 'innovation' being used as a lever for particular social and political ends, often at the expense of the teachers, students, and communities those 'innovative' institutions were meant to serve.

Remembering and forgetting in field-based research

Through two cases, we demonstrate, in concert with theoretical understandings of nostalgia, how histories came to animate these spaces in very different ways. First, through selective *remembering*, as stakeholders in New York selectively revived the 'progressive' legacy of the school in order to ratify present-day reforms, while deeply entrenched in the enduring inequities shaping the school's surrounding neighborhoods and communities in its century history. Second, through cultivated *forgetting*, as stakeholders in Philadelphia used 'innovation' to narrate their practices as breaks from the past and, in doing so, to paper over the district's longer history of 'innovative' reform and its ties to postwar urban renewal, racial and economic stratification, and the privatization of public goods.

Case 1: Remembering

Parkside's immediate surroundings are described in one school report as situated between public housing and the 'environs' of a nearby university. The sidewalk in front of the school, if taken one direction, would pass a large public housing complex that had traditionally sustained a large

share of the school's student population. In the opposite direction, (as observed one weekend in 2017) scaffolding and black tarps were draped over brownstones with large roll-off trash containers lining the streets with waste from renovations. There were also new apartment buildings, one that advertised a professional concierge and penthouse suites on the front of the building, and a flyer posted for children's music lessons in bongos, fiddle, or tambourine. On one street corner, a community church stood next to a recently opened (now closed) whiskey bar. While the scene suggested a neighborhood in flux, a banner above the school door harkened to its past, 'Parkside Elementary: The First Progressive School of Avondale'.

What started as a group of new parents requesting a progressive approach to education beyond PreK resulted in this banner, and invoking the school's origin story to reclaim its progressive roots. In its original form, progressive education was described through a 'learning by doing', philosophy, where teachers were referred to as directors rather than instructors, and students were engaged with practical problems rather than traditional academic subjects like Latin. The original classrooms were large enough to be utilized as wood and metal shops, kitchens and sewing rooms. Numerous studies were written on curricular activities and teacher trainings tested within this school.

What I originally witnessed was how the current school utilized this history to encourage more parents, many of whom disaffected from several iterations of standardized curriculum and testing policies, to attend. What archival data revealed, however, were the ways parents prominently influenced the identity of the school, and its curriculum, at multiple occasions. In its first life as an experimental progressive school, researchers lamented that despite some scholarship funding to help diversify the student body, it aligned more closely to the mostly white and wealthy university community than predominantly immigrant and working-class communities in neighborhood schools. Newspapers reported on some events held at the school where neighborhood children were invited to 'develop better interracial relationships' among children. However, when the building was sold to the DOE, the network of wealthy parents that fought to keep the school open as is bought the school's charter and moved it to a more wealthy and white part of town, and remaining students were taught on the new campus until they graduated, rather than joining the new public school.

Newspaper editorials followed suit, characterizing the public school options around the university as inadequate and unattractive, as not suitable for 'gifted' students. And despite closing their experimental school over growing budget concerns after the Great Depression, the university soon opened another small private school on campus for faculty children. However, calls for more public school options were answered in the 1960s when the DOE announced a plan to locate another public school across from Parkside, one block closer to the university.

When this school was built, however, only one principal was hired to oversee both schools. Another network of parents, mostly African-American, staged a boycott to advocate for more local control of the school, demanding a say in the hiring of a principal, and in the school's curriculum. Over a thousand students ultimately boycotted Parkside Elementary and for a few weeks attended a Black Liberation school created in nearby facilities, led by a professor and protégé of Malcolm X. Stories of their three-week effort reached national news circuits. Although the boycott ended before their demands were met, the school organizers hoped to demonstrate, in progressive fashion, how a school could be crafted around the needs and interests of its Black and Brown student body. And although the Board eventually agreed to let parents review the school's curriculum, these lingering tensions, as the former principal stated, were built into the walls.

The question of which students, within which neighborhoods, does a school and its curriculum cater, is a topic highly subject to selective memory and long confronted by scholars advocating for the redesign of schools and curricula for equity and justice (Baldwin, 1963; Venzant Chambers & McCready, 2011; Delpit, 1988). One purpose of my study was to trace the actors in and around Parkside whose work ultimately enacted curriculum amidst these new reform efforts.

In observation attuned to what was visible *in-site*, and *in the moment*, such enactments were evidenced in local intermingling of students, materials, and teachers. Tracing them out further, though, revealed the ways that these interactions, and those within school choice policies and student enrollment decisions, were also swept up in larger networks of school inequality and segregation active across the school system and neighborhood.

Still, this expansive view was missing the lingering curricular tensions ‘built into the walls’. While the curricular reforms at Parkside, captured in its banner, harkened to a reflective nostalgia of the school’s particular historical ties to progressive education leaders, the archival data unmasked lingering tensions between the university that cultivated progressive education, and the surrounding community of which the university never truly integrated into. It also unmasked the forgotten struggles of other stakeholders, namely parents, in historically shaping progressive visions of the school and its curriculum. To trace, then, the actions of current parents as part of curriculum enactment, required following these historical channels of parent networks and school reform, many of which were not recognized in the school’s evoked history. In other words, attending to these curriculum actors by looking down in the moment, was now untenable without also, looking back.

Case 2: Forgetting

For Phil, the haunting of history manifested not so much in the selective remembering of nostalgia, but in the cultivated forgetting that is required to produce places and practices as ‘innovative’ or ‘new’. Following the thread of ‘innovation’ in one school site had led through boxes of archival materials, vague pathways (and dead-ends) in new secondary literatures, and oral history interviews with anyone who could recall the district’s earliest forays into ‘innovative’ reform. What began to emerge was an expansive tapestry that told a 50-year history of ‘innovation’ in the district—its varied meanings, and competing ends. And what was most striking about this narrative were the continuities between the past and present. Though the district and Innovation School faculty often spoke of the school’s novelty in upending the ‘factory-like’ conditions of most schools by offering asynchronous, technology-rich, competency-based learning, champions of the district’s first ‘innovative’ school made similar claims. Students at University City High School were supposed to enjoy an education that broke from the tedious and dehumanizing teaching methods of the past. Instead, the school was to offer self-directed learning using audio-visual equipment, which would allow students to work through courses at their own pace. This, in turn, would free teachers from delivering rote instruction, and, instead, focus their energies on supporting students in asynchronous work and offering assessments based on demonstrated abilities, or ‘competencies’, rather than punitive grading. ‘Innovation’, in the present, then, was not so much a disruptive break from the past as a revival of existing, if abandoned and forgotten, practices.

There were also parallels in the circumstances under which these ‘innovative’ efforts were mobilized. In the present, ‘innovation’ was meant to signal, to the parents and activists protesting for accessible high-quality education for all, that the district was committed to reinvesting in non-selective public programs. The term was a proxy not only for ‘student-centered’ and ‘STEM-oriented’ learning, but also for educational equity: its innovative offerings were intended primarily to support students in low-income communities of color. Significantly, ‘innovation’s’ usage in the district, fifty years earlier, was also in response to a growing public unrest over crowded, under-funded, and unequal schooling conditions. By the mid-1960s, the local NAACP chapter had sued the district for its failure to take meaningful steps toward racially integrating schools, and student activists were organizing mass walk-outs and protests outside the district office to demand Black history courses and improved school-funding. Within this context, the ‘innovation’ offered by the ES-70 program provided a means for the district to assuage some of these concerns. Funding for the construction of a new high school, for example, would provide resources

for students and would help to spread out enrollment numbers to avoid overcrowding. Likewise, selecting a location for the school would also provide an opportunity to take visible steps toward integration. Working with city planners and a collective of universities and white business owners, the district chose a site for the innovative school in a Black neighborhood, called the Black Bottom by residents, whose proximity to the universities, they believed, could be used to lure white families to the area.

At the time, there remained resistance to these 'innovative' developments. Student organizers recognized that their calls for Black history programs were not being meaningfully addressed by the school's math- and science-oriented curriculum. Parents and teachers, likewise, worried that students had not been adequately prepared to suddenly step into a school model without any of the comfortable routines they were accustomed to (including formal instruction). They crammed into crowded town-hall meetings to voice these concerns. One teacher suggested the district funds would be better spent addressing students' material needs: 'Hunger is not new. Torn pants are not new. They are not innovative. Therefore, there are no funds for that kind of problem'. Residents near the designated school site, likewise, protested the initiative. Many had narrowly avoided losing their homes after the Housing Act of 1949, a racist 'urban renewal' initiative, which had designated blocks in the area as 'blighted', allowing the University of Pennsylvania to buy-up the land for a fraction of its worth for 'redevelopment' purposes. Those who remained believed this new construction project would yield a similar result. And, indeed, all of these anxieties proved correct: with the opening of University City High School, there was no Black history curriculum; students were so disoriented by the unstructured and unsupervised classrooms that the school reverted to a more conventional school-model after its first month; and the process of constructing the innovative school destroyed what remained of the Black Bottom neighborhood, displacing hundreds of residents.

Mapping this longer history of 'innovation' in Philadelphia schools unearthed a flickering instability of the concept's usage in the present. It was not just that there were similarities in classroom practices associated with innovation or in the circumstances under which it was mobilized. It was not that history was, in some narrow sense, repeating itself. What was significant was that the past and present were so thoroughly imbricated: the two were part of the same, expansive story of 'innovation' as a powerful and persuasive discourse in the city—one capable of laundering a variable range of competing interests as a mode of equitable school reform. For me, this recognition unsettled the observable field-site, conjuring the absent presences embedded with its associated people, places, and practices. It became difficult, for example, to hear claims of 'innovative' organizational arrangements or instructional methods without being pulled back to those that prefigured them, and their uneven implications for students, families, neighborhoods, communities, and the city itself. Even more, it unsettled my positionality in the site: given the history of universities in the city leveraging the discourse of 'innovation' in their own interests, what did it mean to be a university-affiliated researcher working in a school of students for whom 'innovation' is not a buzzword or research topic, but a last resort in a district that had otherwise gutted the commons of public education? These hauntings, in other words, impacted more than sites being studied; they provoked forms of reflective nostalgia that extended even to the act of research itself.

Unusable pasts

More than historical anecdotes or contextual details, our encounters with these distributed archives have forced us to consider more deeply not only the histories of our sites, but also our relationship to them as researchers. Even more, they have raised questions about how the imperatives of field-based research can be implicated in the forms of nostalgia, or remembering and forgetting, that operate constantly in-site to render certain pasts more usable than others.

And yet, these norms could also be repurposed as resources for reckoning the present with its past, or imagining alternate futures.

As we have each engaged with historical hauntings, we sometimes struggled to accommodate them in conventional forms of qualitative analysis or genres of academic writing. One such friction, as we have suggested, we attribute in part to the preemptive foreclosure of historical specificity if those details might identify the site, or its teachers, administrators, and students, a potential consequence of traditional masking practices. Such protocols, if left unexamined, may coax researchers away from the hauntings in their site of study, and by default, toward those observable practices that can be easily contextualized in the abstracted site description of a journal article. Although scholars elsewhere have raised considerable issues with the efficacy of masking participants and locations by default in qualitative research (see Jerolmack & Murphy, 2019), the response is not that *unmasking* alone would adequately address the hauntings of concern here. As evidenced in our continued use of some masking practices like pseudonyms, our intent is not their outright rejection, but rather to bring forward what Nespor (2000) posits as their ontological and political implications for research, specifically ‘the way anonymization naturalizes the decoupling of events from historically and geographically specific locations (and with the way location or place itself is conceptualized)’ (p. 549).

A second related friction is the model that academic writing is pressured to follow. In our experience, efforts to include a more expansive historical context that situates the present-day practices of our studies have sometimes been met with impatience from peer-reviewers outside of explicitly history-oriented journals. Reviewers, for instance, have commented on how ‘interesting’ archival materials are, yet ultimately, suggest trimming these details to foreground the present-day activities of the site (which are, implicitly, positioned as more ‘relevant’ to the needs of education policymakers, researchers, and practitioners). While this may stem, in part, from the idea that education, as an ‘applied’ field, should be principally focused on scholarship that is amenable to smooth translation into practice (Green & Cormack, 2015; Labaree, 2003), it also speaks to larger genre conventions in writing up qualitative research, which may foreclose opportunities to coarticulate archival and observational research.

Again, our contention is not that the masking protocols of IRB or the conventions of academic writing ought to be eliminated. Rather, what our engagements with historical inquiry in site-based research have shown is that such norms and practices are implicated in the production of usable and unusable pasts. That is, the same masking techniques that preserve the anonymity of a school site or that direct readers’ attention toward actionable-steps can also be used to unmoor that site from the histories of trauma or resistance that are necessary for understanding its present activities, or that could be of use or comfort to its present stakeholders. Recognizing the ways histories operate both as a way of remembering and forgetting, then, we suggest that ethical qualitative inquiry demands a more expansive sense of ‘masking’ and ‘unmasking’—one that is attuned not only to the importance of anonymity and confidentiality in a site of study, but also to the ghosts of the past who announce themselves in the course of the inquiry. Alongside others who have examined the entanglements of place and the past (e.g. Tuck & McKenzie, 2014), we see the explicit use of historical methods—that is, not just the invocation of ‘history’ or the inclusion of ‘historical context’, but the attentive engagement with the hauntings of the past in the present—as something that can be generatively layered into observational field-based research.

This perspective compels us to ethically reconsider the absent presences in our school sites as something that demand our attention and reflection, even if we do not know where these hauntings will lead or if they will be immediately ‘usable’. Following Toni Morrison’s assertion, that ‘before we look for a ‘usable past’, we ought to know all of the past’ (2019, p. 71), we suggest that the ghosts which lead us into the distributed archives of our sites may offer some clarity to researchers. They do so by making legible the forces of history that, as Baldwin said, are ‘present in all that we do’. But even more, they can destabilize the present in ways that allow us

to recover and revive those pasts that have been rendered unusable, but that might yet be of use for interpreting the present or for imagining futures still to come.

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