

2022

Collaborative Autoethnographic Writing as Communal Curative

Katty Alhayek

University of Massachusetts Amherst, katty.alhayek@gmail.com

Bryant Keith Alexander

Loyola Marymount University

Elissa Foster

DePaul University

Carmen Hernandez Ojeda

Ayshia Mackie-Stephenson

Xavier University of Louisiana

See next page for additional authors

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umass.edu/communication_grads_pubs

Alhayek, Katty; Alexander, Bryant Keith; Foster, Elissa; Ojeda, Carmen Hernandez; Mackie-Stephenson, Ayshia; Moreira, Claudio; Pelias, Ronald J.; Poulos, Christopher; Sutton, Timothy; and Twishime, Portnip Israsena, "Collaborative Autoethnographic Writing as Communal Curative" (2022). *International Review of Qualitative Research*. 18.

<https://doi.org/10.1177%2F19408447211068193>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Communication at ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Communication Graduate Student Publication Series by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.

Authors

Katty Alhayek, Bryant Keith Alexander, Elissa Foster, Carmen Hernandez Ojeda, Ayshia Mackie-Stephenson, Claudio Moreira, Ronald J. Pelias, Christopher Poulos, Timothy Sutton, and Portnip Israsena Twishime

International Review of Qualitative Research

“Collaborative Autoethnographic Writing as Communal Curative”

Katty Alhayek¹, Bryant Keith Alexander², Elissa Foster³, Carmen Hernandez Ojeda⁴, Ayshia Mackie-Stephenson⁵, Claudio Moreira⁶, Ronald J. Pelias⁷, Christopher Poulos⁸, Timothy Sutton⁹, and Porntip Israsena Twishime¹⁰

Abstract

This collaborative autoethnography reflects on how each author experienced COVID-19 and associated precarity. We explore the ways in which this experience relates to our identities (both particular and plural), and our positionalities in terms of privilege and marginality. As a collective of diverse collaborators, we confront dialectical questions of self and society. Our contributions reveal our advantage/disadvantage, mobility/immobility, and the borders and boundedness before/during/after COVID-19. We show the power of curative writing in collaborative autoethnography and how the sharing of our experiences of vulnerability represents an invitation to human connection.

Keywords: collaborative autoethnography, privilege, marginality, precarity, COVID pandemic, forced isolation

¹ School of Professional Communication, Ryerson University (Renaming in process), Toronto, ON, Canada

² Communication and Fine Arts, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, CA, USA

³ College of Communication, DePaul University – Loop Campus, Chicago, IL, USA

⁴ Independent Scholar, Canary Islands, Spain

⁵ Art and Performance Studies, Xavier University of Louisiana, New Orleans, LA, USA

⁶ Communication, UMass, Amherst, MA, USA

⁷ Southern Illinois University Carbondale, Lafayette, LA, USA

⁸ Communication Studies, The University of North Carolina, Greensboro, NC, USA

⁹ Independent Scholar, Eugene, OR, USA

¹⁰ Communication, UMass, Amherst, MA, USA

This collaborative autoethnography builds on the previous performative and collaborative work of this ensemble (Alexander et al., 2019; Alexander et al., 2021) with the invitation to reflect on how each the participants experienced COVID-19 and associated precarity. Through the variation and confluence of voices and forms each piece responds to questions: How the experience of living through COVID relates to our identities (both particular and plural), and our positionalities in terms of privilege and marginality? What is the role or how does the notion of intersectionality factor in our sense-making of experience? Does COVID-19 expose the precariousness of all of us and is COVID-19 really an equalizer? (Did all people experience the pandemic in the same ways?) What has this period revealed about our advantage/disadvantage of mobility/immobility before/during/after COVID-19? How can comparative autoethnographies help us to further understand notions of “normality” in times of disturbance or disruption of the normal? What is the power of curative writing in collaborative autoethnography? And how does the sharing of our experiences of vulnerability represent an invitation to human connectivity during and beyond pandemic, and forced isolation?

In their responses, these authors/artists/autoethnographers/auteurs offer distinct and vulnerable narratives that both challenge the reader to recognize their particularity and precarity, while also, intentionally or not, signaling our collective plurality—in negotiating these COVID-times and our joint humanity; responding to the call of our bodies, locating our bodies in time and space, and in dimensions of flow and flux that have been both foreign and *all too familiar*; offering each a stark clarity of what it means to be *all too human*, and what it means to struggle in aloneness/isolation/separation together. Within these short performative autoethnographic essays, we see people giving voice to experience with shifting notions of trauma yet still striving and marking time, celebrating life, mourning possibility, negotiating and attending to possibility, clinging to collectivity against isolation, embodying resiliency against brokenness, creating the *new new normal*, willing transformative healing into being, and breathing life into a raw new day. We invite you to lean into these performative texts and feel-into the realities of our joint precarity in COVID, and beyond.

“Hearts Beating Fast (or Slow)”

Bryant Keith Alexander

August 20, 2021

During COVID, I took a fall. A fall later diagnosed as cardiac arrhythmia, a type of irregular beating of the heart.

A fall that took me on my first ambulance ride as a 58-year-old Black man; I don't recommend it.

A fall that landed me in the emergency room at an inner-city hospital, that would not have been my first choice.

A fall that kept me in the emergency room for 2 days because of both an unstable heartbeat with constant poking and bleeding and monitoring, and because every bed in the hospital was occupied due to COVID.

A fall that had me propped-up in a bed in a jointly shared Emergency Room (ER) room with a mask listening to blood curdling screams from patients in pain, in resistance, and in a dysphoria of location. I was placed in a ER multi-occupancy waiting room with an array of shared and revolving roommates; the older lady who was being monitored as they waited for her transfer to another hospital because her insurance did not cover where her emergency landed her—as she emanated a bronchial rattle through the night; the older obese man with gout—who screamed and groaned whenever he moved or someone touched his feet or legs; and the hot momma, who walked in wearing a pink velor jump suit with “juicy” on the backside as she hacked and wheezed from a severe asthma attack.

A fall that had me hooked up on an Electrocardiogram (EKG) and blood pressure for 48 hours with the *beep beep beep* of fast and slow beats of my heart, that echoed as a basic rhythmic unit measuring my well-being, and the automatic squeeze and release of the blood pressure cuff throughout the night. All while I wore the now ubiquitous mask of COVID protection in the ER waiting room of that inner-city hospital.

A fall that was severe enough that I was transferred to the cardiac floor to a private room and not released until a clinical-cardiac-electrophysiologist was called from vacation to check me out. He diagnosed that I needed a *transvenous pacemaker* to help with the *beat beat* of my heart that was running irregularly with no sign of ever returning to whatever normal was. Now there is a *new new normal* for me of keeping time; a metronomic insert to the heart that shocks and stimulates and regulates the rhythms in the new syncopated COVID-time regulated beats of our lives—that will linger in me, in us, forever.¹

In the hospital, my mind returned to a previous article I wrote entitled, “Bodies Yearning on the Borders of Becoming: A Performative Reflection on Three Embodied Axes of Social Difference”—celebrating the work of sociologist Laurel Richardson (Alexander, 2014). I wrote then, which feels like now, that—I believe that like Richardson (2013), *After a Fall*. . . we are all trying. Trying to tell our stories as another attempt to feel in communion with others and to find *our own rhythms of living*. Trying to tell our stories so that we continually strive to call each other to attend to our joint humanity *as* arrhythmic and asynchronous as it is, which is everyday living. Con-tinually striving, as she writes to tell “the stories of embodied life” in times and places of shared trauma; to make a difference in each other's lives (p. 263).²

Now I am thinking that *the heart of the matter is really the matter of the heart*.³ How do we continue to live and thrive in a world that demands so much of us: our mind, body, and spirit, and remain fully alive for self and others?

How do we engage in a deep critical reflectivity, refractivity, and reflexivity on what we have all been through and continue to go through in these COVID-times (these ratchet-times) and beyond—to learn? Learn more about the fragility of the human body and spirit—avoiding one thing and running smack dab into other realities of living and dying. Learning about the grace to which we need to extend to each other, and to ourselves. Learning more about what resistance and persistence and survival looks like through COVID and other atrocities—as strategies for the transformation of self and society—that requires a thought-filled recognition of the tipping points of our humanity, of our commitments to change, and a disciplined approach to making it happen against precarity.⁴

How • do • we • avoid • being • witness • party • or victim to the *beat beat beatdowns* of everyday living (COVID, racism, isolation, the politics of difference, and particularity)? And how do we begin to chart the rhythms and the *beat beat beat* of our hearts in synchrony with each other for our joint survival?

Let us get off life-support and support each other's lives; lives that matter.

“COVID-19's Mark”

Ronald J. Pelias

We are marked by culture, by identity, and by personal history, marked for better or worse as we encounter the various logics that do or do not place us in positions of privilege. We carry the weight of languages' referents, even when we try to find our way into the cracks between. When COVID-19 struck, it came as another marker, another name, to put us in our place. In the next few pages, I want to describe how COVID-19 found me, made me into a person who must navigate its power. Although I have so far escaped catching the disease, I still must live with its presence, still must remain diligent. I write into my individual experience to tell how COVID-19 locates me on an intersectional grid, creates me into a subject under its referential thumb.

When COVID-19 arrived, the United States was in a steady march toward fascism, and in true fascist form, Trump and his sycophants politicized the disease, turned it into a weapon to serve their own ends. Witnessing their tactics, which led to the death and illness of hundreds of thousands of people, added to the stress I was already experiencing from their governance during the previous years. I was not alone. With each step undermining the seriousness of the disease on top of a history of policies damaging to the nation and its people, our collective anxiety rose. To be more accurate, I should say approximately 60% of the U.S. population was stressed by what they were seeing while the other 40% contributed to the angst as they embraced the dangerous misinformation they were being fed. This scenario was replicated on the world stage with

the help of Trump and his political allies. The result was a pandemic of a deadly disease and a pandemic of anxiety. Living in the Trump state of Louisiana my anxiety was exacerbated by so many of my fellow citizens' refusal to get vaccinated. My wife and I came to see our Lafayette neighbors as potential contaminants, carriers who we needed to avoid. We quit our part-time teaching jobs, an option for us because of our retirement benefits from previous employment. We canceled routine medical check-ups. We closed off, stopped going to public places, stopped seeing members of our family. Isolation, like it did for others, added to our stress. Although trying to keep away from others, a hurricane damaged our fence to such a degree it had to be fixed. A hot water heater needed to be replaced. A water pipe broke, flooding four rooms in our house. Workers came, some with and some without masks. We were afraid as others entered our space. We put on our masks and tried to keep our distance.

I was also afraid when I was diagnosed with prostate cancer and with heart irregularities and had to leave the security of my home for medical treatment. After consultations, tests, and radiation treatment for cancer and pills for my heart, I found myself being most frightened by the public places I had to enter, spaces where medical personnel often would wear their masks under their nose or chin and where other patients would decide they did not need to wear a mask as they waited for their turn. I wondered if death by COVID-19, cancer, or a faulty heart would be the next label attached to my body.

Like others within our age group, my wife and I were first in line to get vaccinated. Age has its privileges and vulnerabilities. I was pushed to the front of the first-group line because of my medical condition. Illness has privileges, but mostly worries. Once we were inoculated, though, we stopped washing our groceries after using the pick-up at Wal-Mart. We ate at a few restaurants with outdoor dining. We enjoyed a short visit with my vaccinated sister and her vaccinated husband. In short, we breathed a bit more easily, but we never stopped wearing masks and never stopped resenting those who refused to get vaccinated and those who circulated misinformation about the vaccine. When the Delta variant led to the fourth surge, we were disheartened, or should I use the proper psychological term, depressed. It seemed as if our house sagged, turned gray. Our anger increased at those we saw as responsible. We wanted, like others, our lives back to normal.

We are pushing on, like others, trying to be careful, listening to the latest medical advice, doing the best we can. My wife is working on her French for the trip she is planning when all is safe again. I'm writing poems in search of calm, clarity, and a cure. Like others, we miss family and friends. Like others, we have the benefits of having another person by our side as we struggle through. We live better than most, but COVID-19 has marked us, made us change to avoid its deadly touch. We are still maneuvering, still afraid, still trying not to be a COVID-19 statistic. We want, like others, for this to end, for the mark to be erased. Meanwhile, we cling to the privileges we have, reside in the comfort privilege provides, and live with constant anxiety, believing these are hard times.

“Grief, fear, and hope in pandemic time”

Katty Alhayek

Grief

For a short period of time, I wanted to grieve the loss my grandmother.

On January 30, 2021, she passed away. No lab tests were available to confirm the cause was COVID-19 but my whole family in Syria had COVID symptoms at the time of her death.

For a short period of time, I wanted to grieve the loss of the person who raised me and had the most profound impact on who I am today. I learned feminist praxis from my grandmother before I knew what feminism is. Growing up in poverty in a conservative community, she never got any formal education but she wanted me to get one and work so I can be independent and “protect” myself.

Together, we used to spend hours watching Egyptian black-and-white films, she was a big fan! But when in the company of others, we used to watch Syrian television drama serials ([Alhayek, 2020](#)).

She used to wake me up early during my secondary/high school exams, make me tea and a “Zait and Zaatar” sandwich and surround me with her unconditional love.

When I wanted to pursue a college degree in journalism, she was the person who broke with traditions in my family and opened the door for me to spread my wings and leave.

I left Syria in 2012. I shared with you before that my grandmother feared that she will die before she sees me again ([Alexander et al., 2019](#)). Her intuition was true, a complex reality of authoritarianism, colonial borders, and violent racial policies stole from us even the hope to be united again in person. But what these political realities were not able to steal from us is the love, compassion, the happy memories, and my forever gratitude that I had her in my life!

Fear

For a short period of time, I wanted to grieve the loss of my grandmother. For me this was not possible. Fear has left a lasting mark on my body. I shared with you before the saga of our asylum claim story. Although this saga had an unfortunate end, it was curative to document and share with you this traumatic experience throughout the last years ([Alexander et al., 2021](#)).

A month before the loss of my grandmother, in December 2020, the United States government represented by the Boston Asylum Office requested a third asylum interview. Our lawyer asked for online accommodation, a protocol some asylum offices

nationwide followed. The Boston Asylum Office refused. Our lawyer appealed from them to spare me and my daughter from going in person. The Boston Asylum Office refused. Amid a surge of COVID-19 cases, my spouse, infant daughter, and I traveled from Amherst to Boston in person. We went amid fear. They asked my husband to go in and sit in one room with an iPad. Our lawyer in another room with an iPad. The asylum officer in a third room with an iPad. They conducted the interview online through iPads. They told me to stay with my infant daughter outside because of the COVID-19 surge. There was no need for us to have been there. As a word, cruelty is inadequate to describe the asylum system in the United States. I think of the other mothers and parents at the US-Mexico border and in refugee camps worldwide. Anger is an inadequate word to describe what I feel.

For a short period of time, on February 5th, 2021, I wanted to celebrate with my spouse our anniversary of committing to each other. This was not possible. On that special date, we got a Notice of Intent to Deny our asylum case. We had 16 days to respond. We are privileged, educated asylum seekers who could afford a lawyer. Our attorney filed a legal rebuttal. Leading “white” American Syria scholars wrote in to refute the false information and contradictions cited in the denial letter (Zeno, 2021).

For a short period of time, on May 10th, 2021, I wanted to celebrate with my spouse the successful defense of my PhD dissertation. I am a first-generation college graduate from Syria who got a PhD from the United States. On the same date, the United States government represented by the Boston Asylum Office refused our legal rebuttal and issued us a final denial with no chance for appeal. Their intention was to deport us to Syria.

Hope

All my life I have been running in survival mode.

As a Syrian asylum seeker with no valid travel documents, I have been in a state of immobility since 2013.

For a short period of time, North American academics’ mobility conditions were equalized to mine. COVID-19 brought a lot of death and misery to the world, but ironically for me it brought me mobility freedom through the immobility and isolation that this virus imposed on everyone else.

For a short period of time, COVID-19 equalized my condition and that of other academics. This was the silver lining on my cloud. Thanks to COVID-19 I was able to apply for a dream job in Canada; to be shortlisted, and to do my job talk and interviews online. All the stars had aligned for me to get the job in Canada. The United States put my family at risk of deportation to Syria, a country globally known for its authoritarian regime’s record of torturing and forcibly disappearing critics. COVID-19 imposed immobility conditions that gave me a ticket out of a humiliating, life threatening situation. COVID-19 was an equalizer for displaced scholars like me, a fact that says a lot about the current affairs of our world.

“Infertile Pandemic”

Ayshia Mackie-Stephenson

I fell in love and got married during the pandemic. As there was death and freezer trucks and hospitalization and widespread fear, I found something so wonderful and magical in quarantine with Carlin. Six months after we met, it was the first summer of the pandemic and we decided that we wanted to make a baby together. And we have been trying ever since.

We tried during the summer and into the fall, and I never got pregnant. I went to see my doctor and told her I am ready for a baby. I want a baby, a little me, a little me, a little me. A little Carlin, a little us. I was so happy I met the man with whom I want to have children. My doctor said okay, let's do this! And the testing began. I was very excited about the process of IVF; I had frozen 10 eggs a couple years back when I was still in my late 30s. The first test was a hysterosalpingography. It is a radiologic procedure to look at the shape of my uterus and the condition of my fallopian tubes. They said it would cause discomfort, but it was very painful. When they sent the dye up, it felt like I was burning from the inside. The nurse said I could squeeze her hand, so I did. I watched on the screen as the dye stayed in my womb and did not go down the fallopian tubes. My fallopian tubes were blocked.

That was the second sign that I was broken.

This is getting heavy.

The next month I had a fibroid removal surgery, then an abnormal biopsy, then I took antibiotics and had a normal biopsy. The following Spring, I could finally start my egg retrieval. The doctor said that I should do another egg retrieval because it is best to do everything fresh. So, I did. It was so hard. The hormone injections made my belly sore. And I got warm all the time, even under the central air in a New England Spring. When they took the five eggs out, I could barely walk. They told me that I had fluid in my uterus. I could see it on the ultrasound screen. They said they were sorry, and the doctor would call me. I was supposed to go home with a photo of my little embryo transferred. But I did not. I limped back to the car and just cried so hard into my husband's chest. He could not come in with me because of COVID and safety. I ended up limping for weeks after the retrieval and experiencing soreness in my lower belly.

Fluid in my uterus.

There is fluid in my uterus.

I cannot hold this alone. It is too heavy.

I am holding my body. And the paperwork. And the phone calls, the insurance authorizations, the meds in the mail, the three different medical offices, the consent forms, the bills, the portal messages, the canceled cycles, the appointments, the missed appointments, the ZOOMS, the signatures, the nurses, the bloodwork, the teams of doctors, the teams of doctors who do not talk to each other about me, the hope, the canceled cycles, the embryo thawing, the sperm collection without me, the ultrasounds

without him, the masks, the cold hands, the cold things they stick inside me, the egg storage bill, the embryo storage bill, the sperm storage bill, the couriers, the naturopath, the acupuncture, the vit E pills, the waiting, the emails, the voice mails, the hysteroscopies, the hormones, the myectomy, the biopsies, the chomid challenge, the endometriosis, the egg retrievals, the sonohystograms, the injections, the smell of rubbing alcohol, the abstaining from intercourse, the tears, the questions, finding a Black doctor, not finding a Black doctor, the fibroid surgeries, the surrogacy research, the shame, and the canceled cycles.

The canceled cycles. A crushing, crushed dream, dying unborn.

I can't hold this alone. It's too heavy.

Break the silence.

Break the silence.

There is fluid in my uterus.

I changed my doctor and the new doctor said we need to remove the fibroids. *That is* the problem. The fibroids may be causing the fluid. Were these new fibroids? Old fibroids that were not removed before? This was my second fibroid surgery in under 8 months. Before surgery, my doctor came to talk to me. They were going to send me home after the procedure with ibuprofen. I told the doctor that I'd had fibroid surgery 2 years ago before my egg retrieval and ibuprofen and tylenol were not enough, that I was in a lot of pain after the last surgery. It felt like someone ripped my insides out. And I don't want to wait until I'm in pain, and have to call her and deal with the pain until I'm able to get something stronger. The doctor said she doesn't like prescribing narcotics. I told her to prescribe me narcotics. A Black female doctor, the resident doctor, came over to introduce herself to me. I told her I needed real pain meds. She told me that she would talk to my doctor and make sure I get the prescription.

I ended up being under anesthesia a lot longer than expected. My husband was calling and frantic. The fibroid they went in for was not even there. My doctor had to stop and do an ultrasound. I was supposed to get out at 4:30 p.m. and it was after 5:30p.m. The 4 cm fibroid she was looking for was not actually inside my uterine cavity, it was behind a muscle, and they could not get to it through my vagina. My husband was sitting in a waiting room chair downstairs sick to his stomach with worry. The doctor was able to remove a 4 mm fibroid and some adhesions from previous surgeries. My husband did not get to come up and see me; they wheeled me down to the car after surgery. He stepped out and had yellow and pink roses for me. And I went home to heal. And I did leave with that pain med prescription. Then I was on progesterone and estrogen therapy to build my lining. Two periods later, the fluid was gone, just like that. It was gone.

Break the silence. Break the silence.

I can't hold the isolation.

IVF is hard. And a lot of women deal with it. But no one else talks about it. And if they do, they blame you. *What's wrong with you? Just do it doggystyle. Aren't you pregnant yet? What happened to the natural way?* I am a woman, professor, lover,

craving for motherhood, craving for birth amidst the love, happiness, kindness, pain, suffering, fear, uncertainty, and loneliness. And I am not alone.

I can't hold this alone. It's too heavy.

Break the silence.

Break the silence.

Babies aren't always a surprise. Babies don't always come when you don't expect them; when you were least expecting it. Babies don't always come at all.

Fluid in my uterus. Cancelled Cycle.

Fluid gone. But the embryologist can't thaw the other hospital's embryo. Cancelled Cycle.

Insurance needs pre-authorization. Cancelled Cycle.

Move to Louisiana for a new job. Flee Hurricane Ida. Cancelled Cycle.

Maybe I can do an ultrasound where we evacuated to in Florida and stay on track. I don't know. All I know is that I want my baby.

All I know is I am not broken. I am more than my ability to make a baby. I am a writer, performer, scholar, singer, director, activist, daughter, foodie, New Yorker, doctor, lover, sister, friend, wife, bestie, healer, poet. I am not broken. I am living, breathing, being, and hoping.

“A ‘New Normal’”

Porntip Israsena Twishime

I tested positive for COVID-19 when I was 8 months pregnant. It was October 2020 and my partner contracted the virus from work. Not everyone can work from home. My positive test result came after two negative test results and after 2 weeks of isolation in my own home. I was growing a human inside of me, but I couldn't touch or be touched by any other human for weeks. I couldn't see my midwife when I most urgently needed care. I couldn't see my partner or my mother even though we lived in the same home—each isolated to our own rooms, cleaning after each visit to the bathroom, the kitchen. Each of us with our own designated dinner plate, mug, glass, spoon, fork, knife, and cleaning supplies.

I learned that I was pregnant with my first child in March 2020. When the world was shutting down, my world was expanding. This was when the world believed that a 2-week lockdown might do the trick. Like a reset button we could push, and the virus would disappear and we could all go back to “normal.” Pregnant was not normal for me. It was my first time being pregnant and I couldn't receive care. In April, when I still wasn't able to see a health care provider, when I was reading about people giving birth in hospitals without attending doctors or midwives because they'd been called to the emergency room, Massachusetts was in what would become the first peak of COVID cases, and I was scared. I was home. Playing teaching assistant from my living room. Reading and writing my comprehensive exams. I was alone. My partner couldn't work from home. He had to go to the lab every day.

I asked the person on the phone at the local hospital, “. . . But when can I see someone? How will I know if something is wrong? Or right? Will I be able to know if I have a miscarriage? Isn't the risk of miscarriage at this point very high? I don't even know how far along I am. Can someone just check on me first?” Apologizing, she told me that the obstetricians and midwives were limiting the number of in-person visits to only those on a “must-see” basis and that I wouldn't need to see a practitioner until after I was 12 weeks pregnant when the risk of miscarriage goes down significantly. If I miscarried before 12 weeks, it would just look like I had my period. She tried to reassure me by explaining that I might not even notice a miscarriage.

I invited my mother to come live with us as we prepared for the baby. She came at the beginning of September even though my child would be born in December. We tried to interpret the ever-changing health guidelines and research on COVID-19 and travel and decided that it would be safest for her to fly to Massachusetts before Labor Day. After Labor Day, we suspected (and we were right), there would be an increase in air travel and another peak as students made their way across the country for colleges and universities that were going to attempt in-person learning. My mother, a cancer-survivor and a person living with multiple comorbidities, made it safely from her home in Arkansas to my home in Massachusetts.

I knew that my partner needed to be tested for COVID-19 when I found him in bed under the covers in our bedroom with a space heater right next to him at two o'clock in the afternoon. He agreed and we searched Google for a nearby testing site. I double-checked that my student insurance would pay for the test, and we left home. I drove him to the testing site where we stood outside of the building waiting for a text message giving us permission to enter. We explained that he spiked a high fever, a symptom of COVID-19, and that he needed to be tested immediately. They told us that they don't take insurance but that they would give us a coded medical bill for the test and that the insurance would reimburse us for the \$160 COVID-19 rapid test. Out of necessity, we agreed and charged \$160 to our visa.

I was in the bathroom when my partner received a phone call from the doctor explaining that his test came back positive for COVID-19. He hid himself from me and my mother to avoid further exposing us. I didn't see him again until two COVID tests later when I received my own phone call from the doctor explaining that my test came back positive. At 8 months pregnant, I broke the isolation. Opening the door to my partner's room, I reached for him. Feeling another body against mine, feeling the body inside me move against us, he held me while I told him that I tested positive too, despite living in isolation and with gloves and masks in our own home.

I felt movement in my womb a few weeks after George Floyd was murdered. My partner and I were at a small park in our neighborhood where Black and Brown kids and adults go to play soccer, skip rope, swing, talk shit, walk and run laps, and rollerblade in the locked-up parking lot. Just under a mile from Main South where Worcester Police clashed with Black Lives Matters protesters. We wanted to participate in the global protests for Black Lives, but I feared how the increasing use of chemical riot control agents in the US could affect and even end my pregnancy. We were kicking a soccer ball

as round as my belly. I wore a stretchy purple shirt to highlight my changing body. Going to the park down the block to exercise at a safe distance was one of the few opportunities I had to be seen pregnant. The little zoom box with my name on it only showed my face, never my reproductive body the way that I wanted it to be seen. I stopped when a wave of energy surged through my body. I looked up and saw Black and Brown life around me. Joy. I felt it in me.

I made the executive decision that my mother and I needed to be tested too when we found out that my partner received a positive test result. This time I drove my mother to the nearby COVID testing site. We waited outside of the building for the text message allowing us to enter. Now familiar with the procedure, we charged the \$320 to my visa and they stuck long swabs up our noses. That afternoon I paid \$480 for three COVID tests. That's a month's worth of groceries and personal care items at our house. In the final month leading up to my delivery, I spent hours on the phone with my insurance company and the COVID test site trying to get reimbursed for these three tests. I was never successful.

I avoided speaking to my aging father because I knew that I couldn't protect him. He was in Ohio, the place where I grew up, and it felt like he was so far and out of reach. I had a terrifying, recurring vision that he would be attacked 1 day while taking his morning walk around the apartment complex that he lived in. I was furious when Khun Dta Vicha Ratanapakdee died from injuries that he sustained when he was violently shoved to the ground by a passerby. I learned that I liked being invisible. Asians and Asian Americans out of sight, out of mind—enduring racial violence for generations without a spotlight on us. For the first time in my life, the public was witnessing, acknowledging, and reckoning with anti-Asian violence and hatred. A topic that I teach and write about. But a topic that I couldn't speak to my father about because I knew that my words couldn't protect him.

I became a mother wearing only a face mask. The father of my child wore a mask too and so I didn't see the smile on his face when we first laid our eyes on our daughter. We all wore masks—the midwife, the attending nurse, the person who pricked and prodded and bruised my body for an IV that I didn't want or need. By the time I reached the hospital, I could only bear being on my hands and knees. Someone asked me if I wanted a gown to birth in as I undressed and I told them, "I don't care. The baby is coming." I labored at home as long as possible, so that I could be with my mother, the woman who birthed me. I wanted to be with her as I birthed my daughter, but the student health insurance wouldn't cover the expenses for a midwife attending a home birth and the hospital only permitted one birthing partner as a COVID-19 safety measure. My baby found her way to my breast, and I nursed her for the first time while someone replaced the mask on my face.

I write this now as my eight-month-old daughter sleeps next to me. She is quiet and content. Full of potential. There is so much that I don't know as a parent. When my milk will dry up? When she will walk and talk? When she will leave me? Who she will become? What she will care about? What languages she will speak? How my choices will impact her? How she will name herself and her complex identities? Her innocent

breathing soothes my uncertainty. This is my new normal. Writing from bed with a sleeping child about the ways our lives intersect with the worlds that we live in and imagine. About how we affect the world and are affected by it. How we came to be. How we are still becoming. This is normal.

“GIFTS of/in EXILE”

Elissa Foster

Autoethnography offers the possibility that complex, confusing, and often painful experiences can find expression—in the form of a story, a poem, a play, or a layered collage of fragments. The challenge of autoethnography is not only to dig deeply enough to render honestly a complex personal truth, but also to steer the trajectory of the writing towards insight and recovery if not resolution (Bochner, 2000). Invited to write about the impact of the pandemic on my life as an academic/mother/immigrant, I locate my deepest pain point in one inescapable fact; I cannot return to my homeland.

It all happened so quickly.

March 6, 2020, I rise early to take the 6:00 a.m. train downtown to an event I helped to plan. Checking my phone before leaving the house, I see the following message stamped 10:47 p.m.: “Sorry for the late text but I just found out (5 minutes ago) that we have to cancel the conference tomorrow. CDC guidelines. Will be in touch.” The hospital hosting the event had shut down all meetings of more than 50 people; we were expecting 100.

By March 13, 2020, everything is shutting down—our university, the schools, the libraries, the restaurants, and friends visiting from interstate. A family we are close to is moving back to England and must suddenly evacuate the country, fearful that the UK borders will close and they will be trapped in the United States without legal status and with no way to get home.

On March 19, 2020, Australia closes its borders to all non-residents and restricts flights entering Australia. Anyone able to secure permission to enter the country must quarantine in a designated hotel for 2 weeks at their own expense, unable to leave their rooms and, in most cases, without access to fresh air (Rodell, 2021). An exit ban is imposed on international travel by Australian citizens (Mao, 2021). My sister texts me: “I don’t think I will be able to travel to Chicago for your birthday this year.” Little did we know. . .

For 20 years I have planned my return trip to Australia while I am still there; it brings comfort to me and my beloved circle of Aussie kin. My planned return was in June of 2020 when Qantas (the Australian airline) had begun to schedule direct flights between Chicago—where I live now—and my hometown of Brisbane. The idea that I could get on a plane *here* and get off the same plane *there* was utterly luxurious. It meant that if anything were to happen to my parents I could, theoretically, be with them in less than 24 hours. As I write this essay, an economy seat to Australia, if one can be found,

costs at least \$7000; two weeks in a quarantine hotel is around \$5000. COVID-19 has put a stunning sticker price on my longed-for reunion with my family. The vast majority of us Australians living (stranded) around the world cannot bear that cost.

The policies of what is being called “Fortress Australia” (Mao, 2021) have been periodically extended and, currently, are expected to stay in place until at least the middle of 2022. Assuming the ban is not extended again and I can access a flight home as soon as it is lifted, it will have been two-and-a-half years without seeing my family, friends, and my home country. I am bracing for an even longer absence.

I struggle to describe the pain that this exile brings me, so here is the heart of the matter. My parents are of advanced age with all that entails. They are well-supported by my sister, but I am not *there* to help any of them and now I am barred from returning. I feel powerless and angry. During my regular calls home, I fall into a habit of venting my frustration at the continued travel ban, until I register the deep distress my mother is trying to conceal for my sake. Instead, she and I have taken to marveling at the facility of social media and the video calls that allow us to share the small joys and irritations of our daily lives. Instead, we turn our attention away from the gaping uncertainty of when we will be able to hold each another again. I never express the unbearable grief of wondering if the last years of my relationship with my parents will be lived through a series of handheld screens.

So, what do I have to offer you as a transformational turn, a recovery, a gift of my exile?

Here is what I have: I may be in exile, but I am in the privileged situation of having two home countries by choice. I have political and economic freedom that, until now, I had more-or-less taken for granted. I have often felt frustrated and even furious at politicians and governments (who has not?), but until the “Fortress Australia” policies, I never experienced the confiscation of any rights by the laws of my nation. Through an autoethnographic lens, I can see that the hardship of my exile renders more visible to me the differences—not similarities—between my suffering and that of people whose nations truly oppress their lives. As acute as my pain might be, I recognize that I am merely required to sacrifice a freedom to move about the world that I took for granted; it is not a freedom universally shared.

My enforced exile may be a greater sacrifice than wearing a mask, or staying home, but it is of a similar kind in that it is enacted for the purpose of controlling the pandemic within the population of Australia. Refugees of war, oppression, and persecution undertake their journeys into exile without the comfort that they are complying with state directives for the “greater good” of their home countries; they must leave to survive.

As illness often is, the COVID-19 pandemic has been described through war-related metaphors (Semino, 2021)—as an invading force that must be fought, with fallen victims and health care heroes—yet the war metaphor does not serve us. In my exile, I can see more clearly that whatever pain is motivating those who reject mask-wearing and protest social distancing, it is not the pain of lost freedom, nor any serious sacrifice. In the hard reality of the pandemic, and in the context of this democratic country, their

fight for freedom is nonsensical. In an alternate metaphorical move, the prolonged and radical changes to social life wrought by the pandemic have also been framed as, potentially and poetically, “The Great Reset” (Schwab & Malleret, 2020). But if we are to realize this restructuring of how we organize our social worlds, we need a different metaphor that rejects the notions of heroes, villains, and freedom fighters.

The obvious state of affairs is that our fortunes and futures are tied together globally. “To reject the actions, we are called upon to enact for the good of all—from mask wearing, to vaccination, to exile—is a hollow exercise of undeserved privilege, one that reminds me of the tyrannical tantrums of toddlerhood.” It is necessary to acknowledge the suffering imposed by pandemic restrictions along with that of the pandemic itself, but we must find a way to row together, or at least in the same direction, so that everyone can make it safely home.

“Teetering on the Brink: Anxiety in a World Askew”

Christopher N. Poulos

I can put on a show. I got game(face). I once taught a class 5 minutes after learning a friend had just died. I can do this. I can control it. Composure, some call it. I can do this. I just know I can—

Six weeks into my new job as an Assistant Professor of Communication: 9/11. I stand before an auditorium, packed with 170 students waiting for class to start. It is 9:30 a.m. on 9/11. I am, for the first time in my memory, struck mute by events in the world. But I pull myself together, put my game face on, and tell them what just happened. A single student runs out of the room, crying.⁵

In the wake of 9/11, I wrote about “The Age of Anxiety.” Our world was full of anxiety: crashing planes, anthrax scares, war, protests. For months, it was all I could think about, all I could write about, all I could dream about: Was our world on the brink? Were we about to face that “mutual assured destruction” I had heard about all through my childhood? Were terrorists coming to blow us all up?

As I pondered all this, it hit me. Hard. I have lived with anxiety since I was about 4 years old. Though sometimes it was very nearly crippling, very early in life, I mastered my face. I got game(face). Still, at times, it threatened to take me down, to overwhelm me. At one point, it took me into addiction, but I disentangled that, with some help. Still, anxiety was my constant companion, so I learned to live with it, to get past it, to cover it, to put my game face on. As some put it, I have *issues*, but I know how to save face, put on a face, live within a (game)face. But that layer underneath my skin? Well, that’s always a bit twitchy.

Fast forward almost 20 years. 9/11 and the terrorist have threat slowly faded into distant memory. But then: COVID-19. First it was a rumor, then a buzz, and then—just about as quickly as 9/11—lockdown. Pandemic isolation. Pandemic anxiety. Panxiety, I called it. We all had it. Would a deadly plague take us all? Were we on the brink—again?

Well, I was. The flood of anxiety was intense. Daily, it hammered at my consciousness. Daily, I feared for my life, my livelihood, my world. One day Ulysses Everett McGill⁶ popped into my mind: “We’re in a tight spot!” It was a tight spot, that small space. . .that tiny, shrinking threshold between my outward persona and the rest of me. I was on a threshold. And that “rest of me” part. . .it was standing over an abyss. Would I fall into it? Would I stumble, would I tumble, would I plummet into the darkness?

I have often pondered how thin the line is between what we call sanity and what we call insanity, between what I show you and what I actually feel, between tragedy and comedy, between what is going on “out there” and what is going on “in here,” between hope and despair, between joy and suicide. How thin is that line? Is it a razor’s edge? Or a wide-open field?

On any given day, I might answer one way or the other. On any given day, I might teeter on the brink, nearly falling into the abyss. On any given day, I might surge up into feeling just about all right. I have tried my best to navigate this precarious space, but the line has surely worn thin over the past 18 months. I have to say that, well. . .it’s not always going well. It didn’t help when we had a week to shift from teaching in person to “teaching” online. It didn’t help when, just a month or so into this isolation, we watched a video of a man (George Floyd) crying out for his mother while a sadistic cop knelt on his neck until the life was choked out of him. It didn’t help when (necessary) civil unrest broke out in response to this brutal murder. It didn’t help when peaceful protestors were gassed by our “President” for a photo opportunity. It didn’t help when that jaundiced jackhammer “President” lied about election fraud, and urged his followers to overthrow our government, or at least overturn a free and fair election. It didn’t help those yahoos violently broke into our nation’s capital, threatening (and committing) murder and causing mayhem, and wreaking havoc and destruction on the symbols of our nation, even taking a dump in the Capitol rotunda, committing physical and symbolic and actual sedition.

And I wondered: *What the hell is wrong with people?* It didn’t help when these people continued to refuse vaccinations and masks, and forced us into yet another wave of uncertainty.

Anxiety rose and rose and rose.

I very nearly lost it. I was in a precarious position. I was in a tight spot. My continued sanity (whatever that is) was not assured.

At that moment, I glance at my bookshelf, spot an old friend. Did I just stumble into Kierkegaard? This is tricky territory, I think. This could be perilous, especially in my current state of mind and heart. Kierkegaard writes about such uplifting topics as “fear and trembling” and “the sickness unto death.” Still, I begin to wonder: He’s written whole books about anxiety and despair. Maybe he knows something. I open *The Sickness Unto Death*. He writes of despair, and wonders what he can do. He finds himself battling madly, if you will, for possibility, because possibility is the only salvation. When someone faints, we call for water, eau de Cologne, smelling salts; but when someone wants to despair, then the word is: Get possibility, get possibility,

possibility is the only salvation. A possibility—then the person in despair breathes again, he revives again. . . ⁷

And I find myself writing this paper, and I think. . . maybe *possibility*, for me, is in writing. Maybe it's in writing this, right here, right now, with these people. Maybe, I'm reaching toward you. I need help. I got game(face). But I also have issues. Maybe this writing will show me a way out of the anxiety, the panxiety. Maybe this, and you, are my *possibility*. And I find myself breathing, if only just a little.

“Dear scholar: Don’t ask (about precarity), don’t tell”

Carmen Hernández-Ojeda

Round two

I just re-read my first draft about my experiences merging COVID-19 and precarity, *queridos* Katty and Bryant, and I realized that I don't want to share it openly, not now. A decision that has triggered a reflection upon the whole process of writing and sharing autoethnography. Particularly when I am performing as a *junior* scholar who returned home amid one of the worst health and economic crises in a century.

Too much at stake.

One of the lessons this pandemic taught me is to properly take care of my well-being and avoid writing or publishing autoethnographic pieces if I am not ready to deliver them, if I cannot protect myself properly, if instead of healing I can end up deepening the wound. Or if my words might miss the complexity of my quotidian existence and instead sell a grotesque incomplete picture of it.

This pandemic rolled me under an unexpected wave, but, *ay, sí*, I have learned so much.

For months, during the pandemic, I was unable to look inside, to reflect upon my reality, to write. I felt nausea every time I tried. It was nerve breaking because I am immersed in the *(re)productive stage* that can condition my professional future in academia. As a white-hair perimenopausal *junior* scholar in the times of precarious neoliberal academia, when tenured jobs are scarce and competition is ridiculously fierce, my chances to get a tenure track job diminish the further I get from my doctoral graduation date. I can feel my academic clock ticking. Publishing at this stage—and fast—becomes essential. But in order to write, I need to conduct research first. And, as an autoethnographer, I couldn't do it during the pandemic. At all. I tried to push myself and self-reflect, but thankfully I stopped putting pressure on me. Autoethnography cannot be forced. I just let my body adapt to the chaotic and precarious circumstances I was experiencing, floating without resistance. I put everything aside. My body was my focus. Healing, finding my balance again. . . I am still working on that process, slowly, and I am not as *productive* as the system wants me to be, but I cannot care less. The

body is the only thing that really matters. I am alive and excited about the future. Everything else is irrelevant.

I'm a lost case for the neoliberal (dis)order.

I know you expect more details about my experience on precarity and COVID-19. But I learned that it is my choice to share them. Or not. Or only to a certain extent. Social scientists commit to protecting their research subjects or participants. As an autoethnographer, I commit to protecting myself too and decide what to share, even if it fails academic expectations.

That is something the pandemic taught me too.

To rethink my relationship with academia. One of the most unbalanced and unhealthiest relationships I have ever experienced. Always trying to satisfy them, getting into debt in order to be acknowledged by them, sacrificing so much in the process. Even worse, accepting precarity and inequality as academic common sense because 1 day you will become the tenured-chosen one, and you will be able to ignore your credit score and stop living paycheck to paycheck.

“Who cares for the rest, untenured colleagues and students?”

Don't look at me. I don't do academic Disney dreams anymore.

—another thing that this pandemic taught me—

I have other pressing issues to reflect upon, such as whether healing and precarity can truly coexist. Whether I want precarity to define me, my work, my hopes.

I don't.

I scrutinize strategies to leave precarity behind, such a privileged body I am. I don't want to stay in it, to pimp it out. It hurts talking about it. I want out. I want all human beings out of it. Not completely sure what it means in terms of life decisions yet, but I am on it.

For starters, I refuse to dye my premature white hair and hide it anymore. I can hear Kimberlee Pérez's (2014) voice, “hair—all hair—is political” (p. 397). I refuse to pretend to be younger or invisibilize my embodied life-transitions. I vindicate my late forties, my unusual life path, the wisdom, experience, and mistakes I carry. I reject the pressure: I resume writing my own script. I can't believe that an invisible virus had to take control of our lives to reconduct mine, but it did.

Not alone, though.

A bunch of people across oceans—including you, co-writers—performed as lighthouses. In the online spaces we shared during the pandemic, you, co-writers, and I were able to humanize our academic performativity, spread hope and support. To see the other without all the inhuman distance we accept as inevitable, thanks to the liberating power of performance autoethnography. You showed me that another academia is possible, *mi gente*, focused on nurturing, caring, sharing. Transformative.

And healing.

“Orange Colored Sky. How to Do Nothing”

Timothy Sutton

I get stuck thinking I must have something to say before I start writing, but it's only through writing that I know what I have to say. I'm thinking about our collaborative project and what stands out to me is how quickly we agreed to continue writing together. It took us 2 days after presenting our previous work to say yes to this next one. To me, that says we need this. Not to speak for all of you, but I have felt something missing. Something, I think, beyond the joys of collaboration. We reach out to each other across the social distancing for I'm hurting too, but differently. I'm angry, too, for all those reasons, but also these others. Yes, and. And it's in this improvisational space that I begin to see, out of the corner of my eye, a different world take shape. I can feel it.

I was really happy at the beginning of the spring 2020 semester, teaching intro to media studies at Mt. Holyoke College. It is such a useful class to engage in global current events with students, and we were heading into the 2020 election later that year. After we read a few chapters from Shoshana Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, one student approached me to ask for more information in order to focus on the topic for an essay. I sent her to a transcript of a lecture posted to *Medium* by Jenny Odell (2017) titled “How to Do Nothing”.⁸ Odell describes it as, “a field guide to doing nothing as an act of political resistance to the attention economy” (2019, p. xi). Scrambling to move the class online over spring break, I realized this lecture was more relevant than ever as so much (all) of the students' interactions were now taking place over zoom. I posted it for the entire class to see.

Regarding the commodification of our attention, Jenny Odell (2019) writes, “My argument is obviously anticapitalist, especially concerning technologies that encourage a capitalist perception of time, place, self, and community. It is also environmental and historical: I propose that rerouting and deepening one's attention to place will likely lead to awareness of one's participation in history and in more-than-human community” (p. xii). She continues, “Patterns of attention—what we choose to notice and what we do not—are how we render reality for ourselves, and thus have a direct bearing on what we feel is possible at any given time,” (p. xiii).

Lately, I've been reading more and more poetry. Nathalie Diaz, Sally Wen Mao, Layli Long Soldier, Aimee Nezhukumatathil, Cathy Park Hong. Reading poetry, I find changes something in how I think. My brain feels different, like it's not on fire from being on alert from constant crisis. Through poetry, reading and writing, I attend more closely. Poetry demands more of me. Requires I attend to word choice, line break, empty space. This sort of attention is a different relationship to language, to scholarship, to people, to place and time. This attention poetry requires, I think, can possibly reorient my relationship with the world around me away from possession and comprehension (like when you ‘grasp’ a concept), and toward listening, feeling, curiosity and not knowing.

This year the Eugene, OR public library gave away copies of Aimee Nezhukumatathil's *Worlds of Wonder: In Praise of Fireflies, Whale Sharks and other*

*Astonishments*⁹ for its summer reading program. During an online event promoting the book, Kiese Laymon asked Aimee Nezhukumatathil (both are on the writing faculty of the English Dept. at Ole Miss) a question from the chat, “Do you have suggestions for making wonderment a daily practice when it feels like the world is burning?” ([Square Books, 2020](#)).

She suggested getting a cheap notebook, a spiral-bound notebook for 50¢, to start a sky journal. Whenever you get a chance, look up. Write what you see in the sky. Low stakes writing. Describe the clouds you see. Learn their names. Draw them. Some days will be harder than others, but once you make it a practice, “that joy and wonder becomes contagious. Wonder begets wonder,” ([Square Books, 2020](#)).

Yesterday, looking to the north and west, the sky was mostly blue. There were a few contrails drifting toward the airport, some other wispy clouds high up. To the south, the sky was hazy. Smoke blowing in from the wildfires in Southern Oregon and the Cascades.

According to Jenny Odell, “The process of observing draws you into relationship. It is destabilizing. . . . Observation is a form of conversation with what and who is around us, . . . where the boundaries of the self are continually unsettled and resettled” ([Berkeley Arts + Design, 2020](#)). And as Tami Spry (2018) observes, “It is in that co-presence with others, holding the note with several voices where yours alone is lost, not in euphoria, not in infatuation, but in a utopian performative where hope and pain and bleeding borders between selves and other and lands and bodies become traversable” (p. 645).

The moon was orange last night from the smoke. A small, orange half-moon hanging high in the southwest sky.

All of what we went through last year—the pandemic of course, but also uprisings for racial justice, the skies turned orange from wildfire smoke worsened by climate collapse, an attempted coup by fascist white supremacists in the Republican party—it’s all still happening. The crisis is ongoing.

Today, I woke to a strange yellow sky like you usually only get right after sunrise—the golden hour reaching into the day. This afternoon, in the height of summer, the sun began to dim around 4:30, the light again turned yellow. There were no clouds to be seen because the sky was filled with smoke.

Perhaps, amid fires and floods, variant viruses, vaccine hesitancy, voter suppression, a focus on attention may be inadequate. With such high stakes, I become frozen. No one action is big enough to counter the crises we face. Immobile. But in this stillness, I am better able to pay rigorous attention. At times, I find it’s all I’m capable of. “To do nothing is to hold yourself still so you can perceive what is actually there,” ([Odell, 2019](#), p. 23). What I see is just how closely we’re all bound up in each other’s fate, whether we’re talking about democracy or climate change or the pandemic. When you begin to pay attention, it becomes impossible to ignore.

“Raw, Short, and Sharp”

Claudio Moreira

Certain aspects of our lives get closer to home. . .whatever home is, or maybe we need another word to the place we live, the house we inhabit (if there is one) or simply the sense of familiarity and unfamiliarity we sometimes feel in certain places.

A global pandemic exposes, amplify our social disparities, in the intersectionality of our bodies.

Race, gender, class, nationality, to name a few

The rise of the extreme right is real

The increase of the gap between the haves and have not, in the land of free, is also real

These are not “fake news”

January 6 did happen

Brazilian president, Jair Bolsonaro already has been saying that the next election is being rigged against him

The supreme court just refused to block Texas’ abortion law!

Few Glimpses

One

Some things get too close to home. . .

I’ve been feeling a kind embodied memory lately, since March of 2019. It is a vivid memory of Brazil in the late 70s early 80s under military dictatorship. Brazil still received a larger number of immigrants from all over the world annually. The economy wasn’t terrible then but the economic social gap started to get really big. Desperation started to appear in the lives of the poor, almost poor, soon to be poor and yet the top, the riches, were gaining so much. . .

No security net for the people in more vulnerable positions, in the “lower” classes.

That’s the memory I’ve been feeling, do I have to explain it more? I already immigrated once!

Do I need to say more?

Yes, we do have a new president in the USA, but will the lawmakers (from one party) get their shit together?

Will democracy in a country whose political system is based upon two parties, where one of the parties has no commitment with the foundations of such democracy survive?

Even if we never get there, how can we call a political system democratic, when its schematic allows a minority to control the congress, the presidency, and the judicial system?

It feels like de' ja' vu to me

Two

USA is not even able to feed itself without us, fellow immigrants!

We harvest your food

Work in the distribution lines

Look inside your kitchens

And we can even change topics a bit

Who take care of your elders, or people with different needs, and is of course underpaid?

Or maybe ask who are your physicians. . .

You really want to build a wall? Better learn how to cook and care for others

It feels too close to home

Three

Too close to home

I feel extremely guilty when I got vaccinated. . .

And my sister wasn't

And my aunt wasn't

And so many I deeply love weren't

And so many of my fellow humans still aren't

Do I need to say more?

Too close, just to f close.

Four

Too close to home

I have been saying in my classrooms over the years that historically, any empire does not allow its people to really know what is happening outside its borders.

America International Policies or Politics

Remember the dictatorship I mentioned in the beginning of this text, and that I lived under?

Do I need to say more?

For most of the vulnerable humans in this place we call Earth, it doesn't really matter who is the man in that House that is very White

I am not taking a shot at Fox News, it is too easy. I may suggest you to stop listening to CNN or MSNBC for that matter.

Do I need to say more?

From the top of my head

How did the Taliban arrive to power? And no, I am not talking about the last few weeks or months! Can you remember? Did you ever learn in high school?

Have you ever heard about Mohammad Reza Pahlavi? Clue: Iran before 1979 and yes, before Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and

Saddam Hussein and yes, there is a connection there, in these Historical events

Geopolitics, a concept my children have not learned in high school. . .

Still need more?

Libya

Syria

Palestine

Yemen

A whole continent named Africa

The other Americas in the 70s and probably today

What can I say? That House is pretty White!

American exceptionalism my beautiful behind!

It is just too close to fucking home or whatever place it may be.

(Forestalling) Conclusions

Are the answers to the framing questions of this essay answered? Remember, those questions that sought to build a bridge between COVID and precarity as they trope the dialectical fantastic between self and society, between particularity and plurality? Our autoethnographic responses forestall conclusions. Because (maybe) that is what autoethnography does. In the processes of opening spaces of memory and remembrance and delving into the criticality of sense-making; (maybe) autoethnographic writing

attends to the questions more than the answers, as an exploration of possibilities; an exploration of possible ways of knowing the self in relation to circumstances of living, and dying, and society; building new *templates of sociality* (Hamera, 2007).

And when committed scholars and souls come together to do the work of writing collaboratively; pressing the tender parts of their/our humanity close to each other in a choreography of purpose. Maybe, just maybe, it becomes the beginning of a curative (through writing). A curative collaborative communion that renders us not alone in our suffering and in our wandering wonder. Maybe a collaborative choreography is a different dance that helps to render the privacy of our experiencing bodies/spirits/psyches readable by reorganizing the relationship in a joint occurrence with experiences that serve as variations on a theme of being human in times of struggle and strife.¹⁰ Maybe this performatively collaborative autoethnography is (the beginning of) a curative to that which most ails us in:

The *beat beat beat* of our hearts running irregularly with no sign of ever returning to whatever normal was.

As we negotiate the privileges and vulnerabilities of age.

As we try to grieve loss and embrace hope against fear.

As we nurse the lives of others while someone replaces the masks on our faces.

As we recognize perhaps, that during fires and floods, variant viruses, vaccine hesitancy, voter suppression, a focus on attention may be inadequate.

As we weather the storm and declare that *We are not broken . . . we are writers . . .* and so much more. *We are not broken. We are living, breathing, being, and hoping.*

As we plan trips of departure and return, to discover the hardships that our exile renders more visible differences—not similarities—between our suffering and that of others.

As we count 1, 2, 3, 4 and riff—*raw, sharp, and short* (re)membrances of geographical borders and human boundedness.

At the same time, we are *rolled under unexpected waves* we learn to swim amidst it all remembering that *the body is the only thing that really matters.*

As we *teeter on the brink of anxiety in a world askew*, to rediscover and to return to writing, again and again and again as a way out of the anxiety, the panxiety. Maybe this, and you, are my *possibility.*

Maybe the power and the potential of collaborative autoethnography is in asking questions and exploring individual experiences together, as we build *transformative visions and utopias of hope.*

So, we forestall the definitive answers and conclusions to continue our journey of wonder, in/as self and other, together.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iDs

Katty Alhayek  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1108-5399>

Bryant Keith Alexander  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7382-6696>

Ronald J. Pelias  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5318-4355>

Notes

1. See pacemaker surgery <https://www.aboutkidshealth.ca/Article?contentid=1035&language=English>.
2. The reference to “a fall” is also to an allusion to the powerful piece by: Durham (2021) “Wounded: Diagnosis (for a) Black Woman.
3. Here I want to give reference to Father Marc Reeves who used the phrase (which echoed my own sentiments) in his homily on Sunday August 29, 2021—as he reflected on Reading 1, *Deuteronomy 4:1–2, 6–8*; Responsorial Psalm, *Psalms 15:2-3, 3–4, 4–5*; Reading 2, *James 1:17–18, 21–22, 27*; Gospel, *Mark 7:1–8, 14–15, 21–23* at Sacred Heart Chapel, Loyola Marymount University.
4. See: Transformational Science: <https://brandstrategy.com/transformation-science/>.
5. I later learned that her favorite aunt worked in the World Trade Center. The aunt did not die that day. She was stuck in traffic. But the young woman’s reaction was an apt one.
6. The main character of the Coen brothers’ film *Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?* (Coen, et al, 2000).
7. Soren Kierkegaard (1980), *The Sickness Unto Death*, pp. 38–39.
8. This lecture was the seed of what became Odell’s (2019) best-selling book, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*.
9. Both Odell’s and Nezhukumatathil’s books were written from a place of mourning in response to 2016, which at the time, you may remember, was a pretty tough year to get through. Reading them now, I find them to be like a practice run, developing the skills necessary to survive 2020. I think this helps to explain why such distinctively quirky books both found relatively large readerships in 2020.
10. Here I am riffing on Judith Hamera’s notion of “templates of sociality.”

References

- Alexander, B. K. (2014). Bodies yearning on the borders of becoming: A performative reflection on three embodied axes of social difference. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 20(4), 1169–1178. doi: [10.1177/1077800414545231](https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800414545231)
- Alexander, B. K., Hernandez, C. G., Pelias, R. J., Alhayek, K., Poulos, C., Moreira, C., Sutton, T., Stephenson, A., Foster, E., & Twishime, P. I. (2021). Inter and enter: An invitation to collaboration thru autoethnography. *International Review of Qualitative Inquiry*. First On Line: October, 19, 2021. doi: [10.1177/19408447211049527](https://doi.org/10.1177/19408447211049527)
- Alexander, B. K., Stephenson-Celadilla, A. E., Alhayek, K., Twishime, P. I., Sutton, T., Ojeda, C. H., & Moreira, C. (2019). ‘I’m sorry my hair is blocking your smile’: A performative assemblage and intercultural dialogue on the politics of hair and place. *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 12(4), 339–362. doi: [10.1525/irqr.2019.12.4.339](https://doi.org/10.1525/irqr.2019.12.4.339)
- Alhayek, K. (2020). Watching television while forcibly displaced: Syrian refugees as participant audiences. *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies*, 12(1), 8–28.
- Berkeley Arts + Design (2020, December 4). *Jenny Odell: Technologies of seeing [Video]*. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/-V19T9GLgJA>
- Bochner, A. P. (2000). Criteria against ourselves. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 6(2), 266–272. doi: [10.1177/107780040000600209](https://doi.org/10.1177/107780040000600209)
- Coen, E., Coen, J., Clooney, G., Turturro, J., Nelson, T. B., Durning, C., Goodman, J., & Buena Vista Home Entertainment (Firm) (2000). *O brother, where art thou?* Buena Vista Home Entertainment.
- Durham, A. (2021). In R. M. Boylorn & M. P. Orbe (Eds), *Wounded: Diagnosis (for a) Black Woman Critical autoethnography: Intersecting cultural identities in everyday life* (2nd ed. pp. 21–31). Routledge.
- Hamera, J. (2007). *Dancing communities: Performance, difference and connection in the global city*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kierkegaard, S., (1980). *The sickness unto death* (Hong, H. V., Hong, E. H., & Trans). Princeton University Press.
- Mao, F. (2021 May 26). ‘Fortress Australia’: Why calls to open up borders are meeting resistance. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-57224635>
- Odell, J. (2017 June 29). *How to do nothing*. Medium. https://medium.com/@the_jennitaur/how-to-do-nothing-57e100f59bbb
- Odell, J. (2019). *How to do nothing: Resisting the attention economy*. Melville House.
- Pérez, K. (2014). “A Mexican who looks like you”: Reflections on the politics of hair from outside the Black/White binary. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 34(4), 395–398. doi: [10.1080/10462937.2014.944563](https://doi.org/10.1080/10462937.2014.944563)
- Richardson, L. (2013). *After a fall: A sociomedical sojourn* (p. 263). Left Coast Press.
- Rodell, B. (2021, July 19). *Surviving Australian hotel quarantine*. : The Australian Letter. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/19/world/australia/surviving-hotel-quarantine.html>
- Schwab, K., & Malleret, T. (2020). *COVID-19: The great reset*. World Economic Forum.
- Semino, E. (2021). “Not soldiers but fire-fighters”—metaphors and COVID-19. *Health Communication*, 36(1), 50–58. doi: [10.1080/10410236.2020.1844989](https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2020.1844989)

- Spry, T. (2018). Autoethnography and the other: Performative embodiment and a bid for utopia. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (5th ed., pp. 627–649). Sage.
- Square Books (2020, September 2). *Aimee Nezhukumatathil in conversation with Kiese Laymon for World of Wonders [video]*. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/-ivFHwRznpM>
- Zeno, B. (2021, August 12). *Trump may be gone, but the U.S. asylum system is still broken*. The Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/08/12/trump-may-be-gone-us-asylum-system-is-still-broken/>

Author Biographies

Bryant Keith Alexander is professor and dean in the College of Communication and Fine Arts and Interim Dean School of Film and Television at Loyola Marymount University.

Katty Alhayek is an Assistant Professor in the School of Professional Communication at Ryerson University (Renaming in process).

Carmen G. Hernandez recently earned her PhD in the Department of Communication at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and is now an independent scholar in Canary Islands, Spain.

Ronald J. Pelias is emeritus faculty, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, IL.

Christopher N. Poulos is professor and chair of the Department of Communication at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Claudio Moreira is Professor, Department of Communication at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Timothy Sutton earned his PhD from the University of Massachusetts Amherst, a Master of Arts from the University of Oregon, and a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Kansas. Independent scholars, Eugene, OR.

Ayshia Mackie-Stephenson, Assistant Professor, Xavier University of Louisiana.

Elissa Foster, is Professor, Director, Graduate Programs in Health Communication, College of Communication, DePaul University.

Porntip Israsena Twishime is a PhD student in the Department of Communication at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.