



Neni Panourgiá //





We keep thinking that 2020 was the year to end all years. But 2019 was already awful. Fuel thieves in Mexico caused a major explosion in the pipeline that killed over one hundred people. The United States government withdrew from the nuclear arms treaty that had been put together in 1987 between Ronald Reagan and Michael Gorbachev. A cyclone in Mozambique caused over 1000 deaths, and a white supremacist attack at Christ Church, in New Zealand, killed and injured over 100 people. Notre Dame, in Paris, was ravaged by fire during the Holy Week. Ebola erupted for the second time after the 2013-2016 epidemic. Boris Johnson became the Prime Minister in the UK. Fires in the Canary Islands, the Amazonian rain forest, and in Australia were declared world emergencies; the Syrian refugee crisis; the floods in New Zealand. On 11 December 2019, coming home from the last lecture of the semester, I heard helicopters overhead at Morningside Park. Concerned but unable to find any news at the moment, I walked through College Walk back to home. On the ground, underneath the third row of trees, I saw this magnificent mushroom, probably some species of *Hohenbuehelia petaloides*, part of the pleurotus family. I was drawn to its shape and colors and the fact that it was so brilliant in the dark. When I got home I found out that the helicopters that had been hovering over the park were investigating the homicide of a Barnard College freshman, Tessa Majors, who had been stabbed by three young kids almost the same time as I was walking out of the lecture.

### **From the Politics of Theory to the Brutality of Practice**

If there ever was a time when the theory of Medical Humanities could be tested, that time came slithering on December 31, 2019. As the world was celebrating the arrival of a new year, hoping to leave the horrors of 2019 behind, the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission in the Hubei Province of the People's Republic of China announced a cluster of cases of viral pneumonia observed in the city. That same day, Sharon Sanders, a blogger in Florida, started compiling reports of comments made by public health officials in Hubei Province, becoming the first known person to track the development of the pandemic. Although SARS-COV-2 was already present outside of China, perhaps emerging as early as September 2019 in the sewage system of Lombardy, Italy, the first

recognized case of COVID-19 in the United States appeared on January 21, 2020, when a resident of Washington State who had returned from Wuhan six days earlier was diagnosed with the virus. A cluster of cases was identified on February 23, 2020, in Lombardy in the small city of Codogno, close to Milan. At the time, the Milan Fashion Show was being held there from the 13th to the 25th of February.

On February 26, Patient Zero was identified in Greece, in the northern city of Thessaloniki, a woman who had just returned from the Milan fashion show.

All these data points (with minimal socio-economic data coming out of China) gave the general impression that this was a disease of the affluent, of people who were involved with the world of global fashion and could afford to travel. The triangle of China, Lombardy, and Northern Greece, though, becomes legible if we consider the global circulation of capital, aesthetics, labor, and production. The presence of Chinese laborers in the fashion houses of Italy has been well documented, and Elizabeth Krause, in *Tight Knit: Global Families and the Social Life of Fast Fashion*, has shown the minutiae of the interactions between Italy and China that are predicated, literally, upon the point of the needle, as Chinese laborers design, alter, and sew both brand and knock-off garments and accessories in Prato, Tuscany. The third side of this triangle comprises the fur artisans of Northern Greece who collaborate with the *maisons* of high fashion and engage in their own design and production of fur garments. These three entities were on a collision course in Milan in February 2020. Both Northern Italy and Greece went on a rapid lockdown.

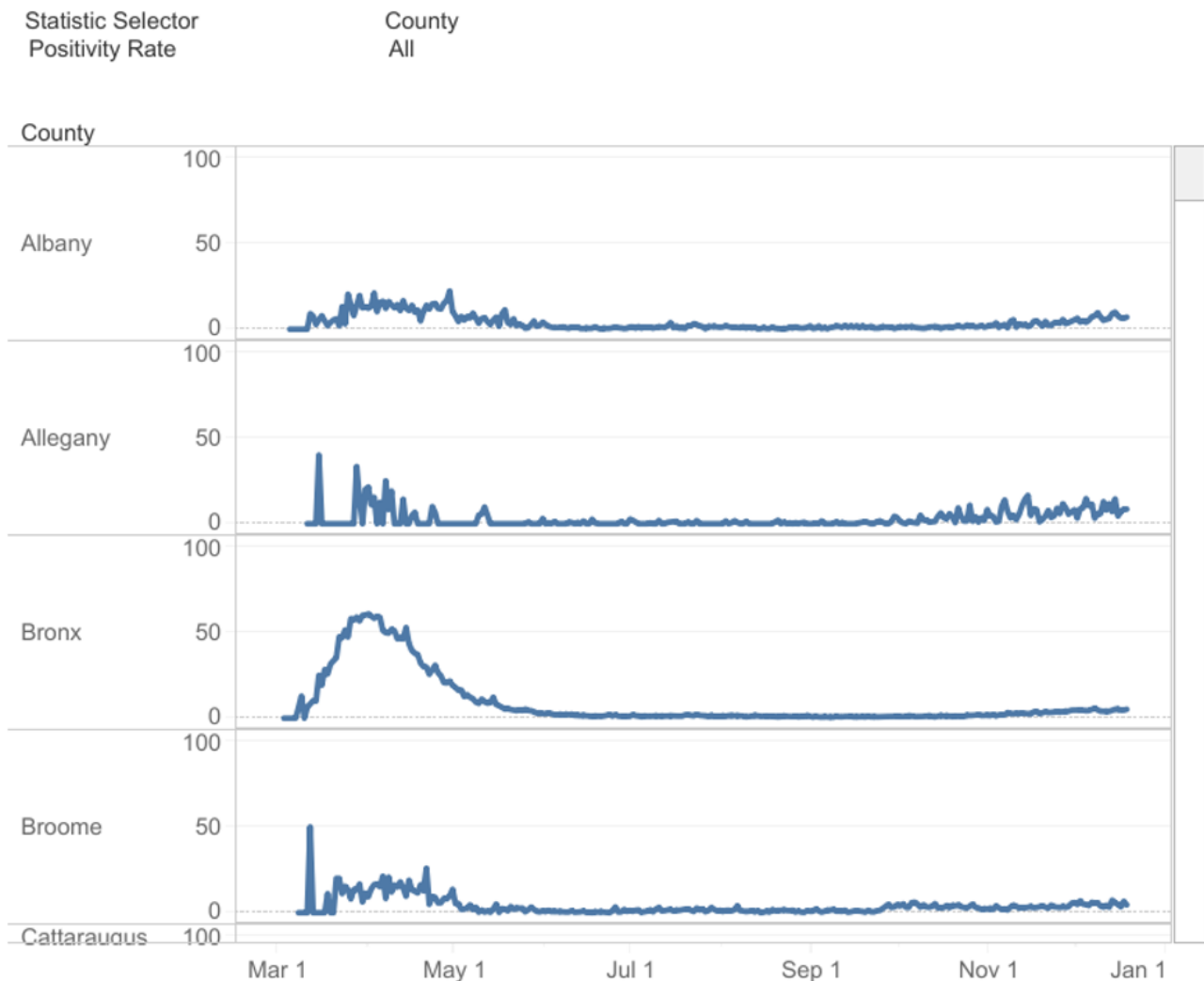
The second cluster of cases was identified in the United States on March 6, when twenty-one people on board a cruise ship that had just arrived and docked off the coast of California were diagnosed with the virus. Out of the more than 3500 people on board the cruise ship only forty-six were tested. President Trump famously said, "Leave them there, I don't need my numbers to go up for a bunch of pensioners," effectively, and misleadingly, adding a second vulnerable population group to the fashion workers: perceived-affluent pensioners who could afford the cost of a cruise.

On the same day, March 6, 2020, New York City had eight identified cases and the next day, seven more. It was a Saturday. At home we were expecting a visit from a friend from Los Angeles when a neighbor from New York called asking to drop by for about an hour. We were happy to see him: he walked in, kissed me on the lips, hugged my husband, stayed for tea and biscuits, told us that his doctor thought that he had pneumonia and had him on antibiotics, got up to leave, hugs and kisses on the lips all over again, and he left. Four days later he and his son walked into St Luke's where they were both diagnosed positive for the virus. Our friend stayed at the hospital for seven weeks, his son for one week. Between the day that he visited us and the day that he was admitted to the hospital, the case load in the city and the rate of hospitalizations had multiplied at a geometrical rate: on the 6<sup>th</sup> there were five new hospitalizations, on the 7<sup>th</sup> there were six, on the 8<sup>th</sup> there were fifteen, on the 9<sup>th</sup> there were thirty, on the 10<sup>th</sup> there were forty-eight, on the 13<sup>th</sup> there were one hundred forty-four.



But it soon became clear that the virus was hitting hardest those counties in the state that had the lowest levels of income and the largest concentration of correctional facilities, those counties that had the largest concentrations of Black, brown, and Latinx residents. And although it still is true that the virus causes the same levels of severity and presents the same prognostics of morbidity across socio-economic, ethnic, and political strata, the systemic inequities, inequalities, and institutionalized racism that are endemic in capitalist state formations produce a different landscape, a landscape that the medical humanities is called to address.

## COVID Statistics in New York State: 3/2/2020 to 12/18/2020



Visualized by Jake Dobkin / Data from NYS DOH

“Coronavirus Statistics: Tracking the Pandemic in New York,” is published daily by Gothamist, and archives the development of the pandemic in New York.

The pandemic developed at an unprecedented, accelerated rate that exposed the depth at which the greed of the global economic systems had ravaged the (already minimally existing) social welfare state through budgetary cuts brought against the structures that should have provided a safety net to the taxpayers and the indigent populations. The healthcare system was overwhelmed within two weeks, and entire hospitals were retrofitted as COVID-19 centers. The prison system was left to its own (largely non-existent) devices. In the Spring semester, I was teaching at the Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn. The class was one that I have taught many times before, *The Ethnographic Imagination*, and on Friday, March 6, we had finished the discussion of Philippe Bourgois’s book *In Search for Respect: Selling Crack in the Barrio*, and I had introduced the reading for the next week, Jason De Léon’s *The Land of Open Graves*. I collected students’ papers, as I was handed two poems by two students, and an autobiographical first draft by another student who had lived, worked, and actively participated as a fourteen-year-old in the crack-dealing reality

of 1987 that Bourgois was describing. Leaving the building in the bitter cold of that day, my Teaching Assistant, Jeremiah Aviles, and I talked about the students' reaction to the discussion.

That was our last class at MDC Brooklyn. Governor Cuomo declared a “pause” the next Friday, the 13<sup>th</sup> of March. We were told to create small bubbles of social interaction; not to touch, hold, kiss, or hug anyone who was not in our immediate household, not even our children if they did not live at home; to wear masks in public and inside; not to ask to be tested because there were not enough test assays; to disinfect everything, including food. The silence, interrupted at a rapidly growing rate by the sirens of ambulances, became unbearable. As businesses closed and people started losing their jobs unless they belonged to the essential sector—cashiers at supermarkets, delivery men and women, custodians, door attendants and porters, health-care personnel, sanitation workers, train and bus conductors—and the social bubbles became impenetrable social snow globes, many of the returned citizens who comprise the student body of the Justice-in-Education Initiative at Columbia (one part of which is the Prison Education Program, which conducts classes inside the prison system) found themselves in a new level of precarity. As we, at JIE, tried to find ways to keep our JIE Scholars educated and occupied, we received news of the first prisoner to die of COVID-19 at Sing Sing Correctional Facility in Ossining—the first prisoner to die in the New York prison system. Sing Sing is the only facility in the state that has a complete educational curriculum that starts with basic education and goes to the Master's level. Many of our Scholars either come directly from Sing Sing or have spent time there. The news of the death of 58-year-old Juan Mosquero on March 30 exposed the lack of preparedness for any possible epidemic within the prison system. It also showed again the vulnerability of this particular population and their families. The death penalty was abolished in New York State in 2007, and no one has been executed since 1984, but the spread of the virus in prisons became a *de facto* death penalty, even for minor infractions.

The first week in April, I was asked if I could put together a workshop on Zoom on interview methodologies, and I decided the most relevant topic would be a workshop on COVID-19 auto-ethnographies to be taught within the JIE program. We then extended an invitation to the entire JIE community, meaning all formerly incarcerated persons who have had a connection with JIE. Fourteen people signed up for the workshop, and four Columbia undergraduates volunteered as tutors. M.Lisa Hollingworth, a primary teacher and educational specialist at Boys and Girls Clubs of America, who was already volunteering for the program, took over as head volunteer. Jeremiah Aviles, my TA at MDC Brooklyn, was again the TA for the workshop. JIE allowed Kay Zhang, the Program Manager at the Heyman Center for the Humanities, to help with the Zoom particulars.

The premise that framed the workshop was a notion that had started getting some traction in the press and social media where the “lockdown” (as it came to be known) was compared to prison and solitary confinement. Someone posted on social media a note saying “the lockdown is my Attica,” obviously referring to the maximum-security prison in upstate New York. The students in the workshop took particular exception to this notion and wanted to address it. In the course of the semester, they were taught the basic premises of fieldwork and ethnography, the perils of objectivist thought, and the dangers of auto-ethnography becoming omphaloscopy. They

interviewed members of their families, friends, and fellow students. Some wrote explicitly about their own experiences as reflected through the narratives of their families, while others wrote more detached accounts. The workshop exposed deep inequities in the learning structures of this population and the depth of the precarity that organizes these lives. While JIE undertakes the cost of transport to class by supplying the Scholars with Metrocards and childcare, when and where needed, remote learning upended all this. Most of the Scholars did not have a stable enough Internet connection to use to join in; one had to go to the corner laundromat to get free Wifi, and another one had to use the city's free Wifi in the park. Two Scholars did not have childcare because their partners were working remotely, too, or they could not transfer the children from their house to their parents' house for child-sitting. One student could join only when he was not using his video, and another had to share her laptop with her children. Some were essential workers, so class time was the only time they could eat dinner, and one, caring for a dying elderly parent, had to stop in the middle of class to turn the parent on his bed because he had lost his job and could no longer pay the caretaker.

Despite all this, the Scholars persevered. They all came to class, did the readings, asked questions, conducted interviews. And they all showed their creativity and their resilience. One student, Egypt Dior, who is in the 2020 JIE cohort, wrote a song. Ivan Calaff wrote a yell and transcribed a poem recited to him over the telephone by a friend of his in a prison upstate. Tanya Pierce wrote about the death of her friend, someone who had helped her transition from civilian life to prison life when she first arrived at the facility. Tone Shewprashad writes about the conditions inside the prison during the pandemic as they were related to her by a close friend who is still incarcerated. Nascimento Blair tackles the wider framework of incarceration and the lack of preparedness within the system as he speaks with a friend who is still inside. Luke Lyons, another member of the 2020 cohort, talks about transitioning while inside and the strong bonds that he made in prison. Luke expresses a wistfulness for the social connections of the prison environment and writes particularly about being transgender while incarcerated. Levar Henry, also in the 2020 cohort, gives a slice of the everyday during the pandemic at Polo Grounds, the large residential project in the Bronx, while Shawn Elijah Williams (cohort 2017) gives advice as to how we, in the world outside of prison, can think productively about isolation. Eileen Maher, having spent two years in prison and three on parole, writes a "Letter to America." Helen Skipper, "Skip," 2020 cohort, writes on the importance of bringing up young Black men at this point in this country, as a formerly incarcerated LGBTQ social activist confined to the house.

Several essays are accompanied by photographs that I took of flowers at Riverside Park in spring 2020. They are meant as temporal transitional points during the time that the workshop took place, from the last day on campus in the fall semester of 2019 to the last day of class in June 2020.

## **Table of Contents**

Crushing Bones // Ivan Calaff

Letter to America // Eileen Maher

Polo Grounds. A Photographic Essay // Levar Henry

Autoethnography in her own song & lyrics // Egypt Dior

Visibility // Luke Lyons

Toothbrush // Tone Shewprashad

Intersectionalities—rage, fear, fearlessness // Helen “Skip” Skipper

Sociabilities, socialities, violences // Nascimento Blair

Pillows // Tanya Pierce

A piece of advice on how not to go crazy during a lockdown // Shawn Williams

Medical Humanities, COVID-19, and States of Confinement // Neni Panourgiá

**Author bio:** Neni Panourgiá, the guest editor of our special issue on COVID-19 and incarceration, is an anthropologist, Academic Advisor for the Justice-in-Education Initiative, and Faculty at the Prison Education Program at Columbia University. Her work has received numerous prizes and awards, among others the Victor Turner Prize for Ethnographic Writing, the Keeley Prize of the Modern Greek Studies Association, the Solomon-Pitré Prize in Ethnohistory, and the Chicago Folklore Prize. Her books include *Fragments of Death, Fables of Identity. An Athenian Anthropography* (1995), *Dangerous Citizens. The Greek Left and the Terror of the State* (2009), *Leros, The Grammar of Confinement* (2020), edited volumes, and articles on anthropological and ethnographic theory; auto-ethnography; forms of confinement; architecture; and the social dimensions of medicine. She is the Co-Editor-in-Chief (with Katrina Daly-Thompson) of *Anthropology and Humanism*, the flagship journal of the Anthropology and Humanism Section of the American Anthropological Association. Her new book *Neural dis/continuities and the Saltatory Conductivity of Space. Leros in the Mind* is forthcoming in Fall 2021.