



PALGRAVE STUDIES IN
LITERARY ANTHROPOLOGY



Dispatches from Home and the Field during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Robert Desjarlais · Sabina M. Perrino
Joshua O. Reno · Nicholas Bartlett · Aurora Donzelli
Margaux Fitoussi · Alexa Hagerty
Rafadi Hakim · Parthiban Muniandy · Emily Ng



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Palgrave Studies in Literary Anthropology

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This series explores new ethnographic objects and emerging genres of writing at the intersection of literary and anthropological studies. Books in this series are grounded in ethnographic perspectives and the broader cross-cultural lens that anthropology brings to the study of reading and writing. The series explores the ethnography of fiction, ethnographic fiction, narrative ethnography, creative nonfiction, memoir, autoethnography, and the connections between travel literature and ethnographic writing.

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The face of London was—now indeed strangely altered: I mean the whole mass of buildings, city, liberties, suburbs, Westminster, Southwark, and altogether; for as to the particular part called the city, or within the walls, that was not yet much infected. But in the whole the face of things, I say, was much altered; sorrow and sadness sat upon every face; and though some parts were not yet overwhelmed, yet all looked deeply concerned; and, as we saw it apparently coming on, so everyone looked on himself and his family as in the utmost danger.

Daniel Defoe,

A Journal of the Plague Year, 1722

As you can see, the sun is high, the heat intense, and the silence unbroken save by the cicadas in the olive trees. For the moment, it would be the height of folly to quit this spot. Here the air is cool and the prospect fair, and here, observe, are dice and chess. Take, then, your pleasure as you may be severally minded; but, if you take my advice, you will find pastime for the hot hours before us, not in play...but in telling stories, in which the invention of one may afford solace to all the company of his hearers".....The queen's proposal being approved by all, ladies and gentlemen alike, she added: "So please you, then, I ordain, that, for this first day, we should be free to speak on whatever matter we please." She then addressed Panfilo, who was seated to her right, bidding him with a gracious air to lead off with one of his stories. And prompt at the word of command, Panfilo, while all listened intently, thus began.

*Giovanni Boccaccio,
The Decameron, 1353*

PREFACE

WRITING VIRAL

The book that you hold in your hands entails a multi-voiced compendium of writing on life during the COVID-19 pandemic, within the strands of first-person, reflective writings authored by ten scholars who work primarily within the fields of anthropology and sociology. The first of our writings began in the Spring of 2020, during those intense and heady initial weeks of the pandemic, as pressing concerns about the coronavirus took form throughout the world. The first series of exchanges occurred over email and Zoom meetings between editors Robert Desjarlais, Sabina M. Perrino, and Joshua O. Reno. This tentative, exploratory conversation soon grew into a sustained dialogue with seven other scholars across the globe, namely Nicholas Bartlett, Aurora Donzelli, Margaux Fitoussi, Alexa Hagerty, Rafadi Hakim, Parthiban Muniandy, and Emily Ng. Month by month, we asked ourselves to write on various formations of the pandemic from our respective vantage points, as we tried, alone and in relation to others, to make sense of and live with the many challenges and possibilities for life during these times.

The short essays, or entries, featuring this book have been spun from diverse situations, contexts, and locations from the United States, be it Oakland, California, Illinois, and upstate, urban, and suburban New York, to dispersedly still, Denmark, England, Italy, France, the Netherlands, and Tunisia, along with the considerations of present-day life in places like China, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Each entry proceeds within a spatiotemporal flow, starting in March 2020, with the first alerts and cases of viral



Fig. 1 Quarantine sign, Christiania, Copenhagen, June 2020. (Photo by R. Desjarlais)

infection in various parts of the world, and then moving on to various currents of caution, concern, infection, despair, hope, and connection that have unfolded since those early days. The writings then move into 2021, with events and moods associated with the global distribution of potentially effective vaccines and the promise and hope these immunizations bring. The written record of these multiform reflections involves traces of a series of lives, as the authors of those lives tried to make do, and write, in trying times (Fig. 1).

This collaborative effort has led to something distinct. Rather than an edited volume with dedicated chapters, the current work derives from our process of writing together as a collective for over a year. The format is fitting for the evolving and precarious conditions created by the pandemic. Instead of being asked to devise distinct and comprehensive scholarly chapters, rich in precise expertise and learned reasoning, the contributors to this volume have crafted a number of entries, each brief and compact, with reflections that allow each author's perspectives and stories to emerge, in tandem with the pandemic itself. In this way, our book has a distinctive, emerging multivocality which is not interrupted by the more common division of dedicated, single-authored chapters. This approach thus creates

a dynamic flow to the writing throughout, such that the sections of the book are not framed or divided based on abstract themes but, rather, are punctuated by global events and the vicissitudes of pandemic life, including initial reactions to successive “waves” of infection, societies closing down and then opening again (only to shut down again, in ever-shifting circumstances), with the promise of vaccinations emergent on the horizon.

One of the main questions this book asks is: What does it mean to live and write amid an unfolding and unstoppable global health and economic crisis? As we have been writing, people around the world have been socially distanced and confined indoors, and many are writing as well. This is true in terms of a greater reliance on emails, texts, posts, and other digital tools as substitutes for interpersonal interactions, but also is reflected by the explosive growth in personal journals (“From first-time diarists to lifelong notebook enthusiasts, people around the world are jotting down their thoughts in the pandemic”¹) in newly begun books and memoirs (“Pandemic prose: COVID-19 sparks literary effort”²) or, on the more practical side, in the last will and testaments that more people are writing in light of ever-present, everyday death. Across the globe, people are arguably writing more now and with more urgency, be it to communicate with others, leave a clear record behind, get some work done, or to reflect creatively on the actualities of the pandemic.

Dispatches from Home and the Field during the COVID-19 Pandemic begins with the sobering thought that during a pandemic—and, more generally, in all times—writing is both remedy and poison. In keeping with Jacques Derrida’s translation of Plato’s *pharmakon*, there is something about writing that “doesn’t come from around here. It comes from afar, it is external or alien: to the living, which is the right-here of the inside, to the *logos* as the *zōon* it claims to assist or relieve.”³ Writing is virus-like, in that it is not so much a danger to one’s body as it is indifferent to whether we live or die and will use up our corporeal resources for its own ends as needed. Writing, in this sense, may be intersubjective but it is also sub-subjective, potentially dissolving ourselves in alien alphabetic acids even as we attempt to lay our “real” selves bare. Perhaps this explains why, at the same time as there has been a veritable explosion in writing, levels of anxiety, depression, and mental illness have also been growing in concert (as the US Center of Disease Control reports).⁴ In this regard, we should not be so quick to decide whether writing is best classified here as symptom, cure, or cause.

Soon after the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, we shared our writing with one another, in the hopes that we might go “beyond the

lonely anthropologist” evident in so much ethnographic writing.⁵ At first, there were five authors, then eight, and then ten, with each person drawing from their acumen in the fields of, variably, linguistic, medical, and sociocultural anthropology, literature, philosophy, sociology, the arts, and photography. The connections involved were often circumstances of accident and network; along with diasporic intimacies that emerged as if seemingly by chance, with friendships created and sustained through trying times. The dynamics of our collective writing thus mirrored emerging forms of (non)sociality triggered by the pandemic. New friendships as well as disconnections were created through viral fractures and relations. We made new friends, but also lost others. Emergent from these correspondences is a rhizomatic network of friends and colleagues who share a sympathy toward writing about perceptions and experiences in tangible, intensive, less recognizably “scholarly” ways. We were virtual comrades, in Jodi Dean’s use of the term, somehow “on the same side” if never under the same roof.⁶ Looking back at our collaboration, our conviction now is that, if writing—ethnographic or otherwise—has always presented the troubling possibilities of reflecting on and in life, then pandemic times create an opportunity to think with and through writing in new ways. In short, how does the COVID-19 pandemic change or redirect our attention to the dissolution of the fictitious singular “self,” long held suspect, if directed toward the implosion of affective and communicative relations that emerge, unexpectedly, irresistibly, in challenging times of radical and global change? How might then authors speak to the sundry challenges, concerns, and wayward perceptions that arise through the tremulous course of a pandemic of such proportions?

Dispatches is the product of a novel collaborative endeavor to delve into forms of writing in “real time” during emergent moments of a global crisis. From the start, we thought of our writings as *dispatches* of various sorts—informal, personal communiqués, written from a plurality of locations and contexts, through words that carried a sense of immediacy, of direct relevance to the lives and deaths under consideration. There is a distinct literary form to a dispatch, which is unlike the entries of a journal, or an ethnographer’s fieldnotes, which are chiefly written by and for the ethnographer herself, as notes only. A dispatch is also unlike any of the news updates rifling through the media these days (as with the constantly updated, “Here’s what you need to know” posts on the “live” website of *The New York Times*). A dispatch implies something “dispatched” quickly, something “sent off” or “sent out”—or something “dismissed,” or “disposed of properly,”—done away with, even. There’s an air of a message

and a messenger in any written dispatch, words are penned and sent off, dispatched, intended to be read by others. The text of a dispatch is like a flash, a flare, a blast, an SOS, or a message in a bottle, drifting upon a lonely ocean expanse, possibly but not necessarily reaching a reader, continents away. A dispatch is usually geared toward a public, toward a readership that is direct and immediate, or potential, abstract, or imagined only. The dispatch can involve a form of emergency-driven first-person writing, which turns the self and its grounds into an object of observation, and, often, is addressed to a generic, unknown, potential reader/addressee. There is a sense of urgency and now-time quality to a dispatch. The dispatch tends to evoke a powerful mixture of first-person testimony awareness (and alienation, at times), as in writing on the edge of disaster, in a time of catastrophe, or in scenes of conflict. And unlike the crucially important reporting of journalists, there is an air of anthropological reflectiveness—and anxious rumination, at times—with our dispatches. Accordingly, we have written within the urgent temporalities and intensive language of what might be called dispatch ethnography.⁷

Through the course of 2020, and then on into 2021 and, briefly, 2022, contributors have shared and circulated their candid reflections on the global COVID-19 pandemic as it has been unfolding through the lenses of their everyday lives. The brief and singular essays preserve the sense of urgency, uncertainty, and open-endedness of diverse subjective experiences and intersubjective engagements. The *viral* is both subject and method here; along with relating to the processes and effects of the COVID-19 virus, the writing, through time, has proceeded in decidedly viral forms: one person's dispatch led to another's reflection, the potent glean of an image spawned further images, within a discourse-contagion of thought, affect, image. In time, the *variant* became a motif; just as the COVID-19 virus has been taking on new viral forms, issuing novel "variants of concern" in the world (Alpha, Delta, Omicron B1 and B2, etc.), and with life more generally shifting into new emergent forms of relation and becoming, illness, and possible well-being—like a kaleidoscope that keeps shifting into new arrangements of optical form with each new rotation of a multi-reflector device—so each new series of dispatches appeared like novel variants of thought and experience, adding to what came before, shifting the terms of perception.

Above all, we have tried to pay attention to the *intensities* of everyday life, and to the affects that course through our days and nights and those of others: grief, sadness, worry, concern, anxiety, fear, loneliness, isolation, hope, joy, anticipation, senses of uncertainty, and meditations on

death—the “ordinary affects” of extraordinary times, as it were.⁸ The intensities involved are at once kinetic (the rapid speed of events, exponential contagion, the acceleration of “number streams,” keeping tracking of viral rates and new variants, along with the slowing down of daily practices and interactions), temporal (speeds and slownesses, variable recurrence, the déjà-vu-like, *déjà-covid* quality of many coronavirus-governance patterns, the eternal return of restriction), acoustic/sonic (the sounds and silences of pandemic life), corporeal (symptom, sensation, contact, isolation), tactile (proximity, touch, and the absence of touch), material (masks, jabs, intangible but highly dangerous viruses, the lonely companionship of food, coffee, games, books, podcasts, Netflix), and relational (yearning for moments among others while fearful of such proximities and potential intimacies). Such first-person and interpersonal reflections touch on a plurality of themes brought on by the pandemic, forces, and dynamics of pressing concern to many, such as contagion, safety, health inequalities, societal injustices, loss and separation, displacement, phantasmal imaginings and possibilities, the uncertain arts of calculating risk and protection, limits on movement and travel, and the biopolitical operations of sovereign powers. Different, intersecting scales of life, pathology, and governmentality are implied: the granular, micrologic scale of the writing proceeds within a backdrop of events at a more macro-level—from “viral spread” and the nation-wide, government-enforced shutdowns and travel bans to health disparities and the depletion of medical resources in certain communities, and the deaths of many. With this, certain structures of attention recur; major events tend to lie in the background, while the intensity and extensivity of minor details are foregrounded. (Auto)ethnography here is not just a style of writing, but a crystalized form of lived experience.

These are fragile texts. They are written in situations of existential and social precarity, of vulnerability, within swirls of pandemic anxiety and fatigue, in situations where the right next steps were uncertain and the future viability of oneself and loved ones was thrown into question. With this anxious poetics, weariness and exhaustion sometimes underpin the mood of the writing. We wrote, in fact, until we grew tired of writing, tired of thinking and writing intensively about the pandemic, the world of this text ends with a sigh. An air of vulnerability and exposure might therefore transfer over into any receptions of this volume. When it came to editing and revising the dispatches with an eye toward publication, we tried to maintain the fragility of the texts, and refrained from polishing them too much or fashioning them into perfected expert treatises. There

is an immediacy here, a rawness to which, we believe, many persons who have lived through a pandemic can relate.

Because each section of the book coalesces around specific times, spaces, and events in the growth and spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, we also offer additional, conditional, short prefaces to each part. We trust that these will help orient the reader as they find their way through our dispatches. In some cases, readers might use this as a means to read the book out of order or to avoid some topics that they are not ready to revisit. No less than writing, reading too can be poison and cure.

Viral times call for viral writing. The many life moments, experiences, and stories that give life to this multivocal book are unique to this historical moment. Pandemics of such proportions do not happen often, but they do leave indelible marks in humans' lives and souls as other natural disasters and traumatic events do. The embodied writings from the contemporary moment will likely be read and told in future times. They will be recounted to children and grandchildren. Perhaps they will become part of new pandemic feelings of dread, fear, isolation, uncertainty, immobility, and hope and creative living in other future, trying times.

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NOTES

1. <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/21542132/journaling-bullet-journal-coronavirus-pandemic> (last accessed, December 30, 2020). See also The Pandemic Journaling Project, a joint initiative of Connecticut University and Brown University; Benedict Carey. 2021. “*Right Now Feels So Long and Without Any End in Sight*,” *The New York Times* February 15, 2021.
2. <https://www.twincities.com/2020/09/14/pandemic-prose-covid-19-unleashes-literary-outpouring/> (last accessed, December 30, 2020).
3. Derrida (1981: 104).
4. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6932a1.htm> (last accessed, December 30, 2020).
5. In Alma Gottlieb's (1995) terms.
6. Dean (2019).
7. Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1977) comes to mind as an exemplar in dispatch. These observations on the literary form and qualities of dispatches draw in particular from the ideas of Aurora Donzelli on the matter, which she generously developed and shared with the authors of this preface.
8. On “ordinary affects,” see Stewart (2008).

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