

A hand holding a bundle of red pencils against a blue sky with clouds. The pencils are held together in a fist, pointing upwards. The background is a clear blue sky with some light clouds. The hand is positioned in the center of the frame, with the fingers wrapped around the pencils. The pencils are red with gold erasers and sharpened tips. The overall image conveys a sense of hope, learning, and resilience.

# Literacy and Learning in Times of Crisis

Emergent Teaching Through Emergencies

Sara P. Alvarez,  
Yana Kuchirko,  
Mark McBeth,  
Meghmala Tarafdar,  
and Missy Watson,  
Editors



PETER LANG



# STUDIES IN COMPOSITION AND RHETORIC

Alice S. Horning  
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To health care workers who helped us survive  
To teachers who helped us thrive

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# Long-Haul Writing: Creating Community Amid Crises

ANN E. WALLACE

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## INTRODUCTION

Many years ago, my final semester of college was upended when I was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. In the space of two hazy months, I learned that I had a large mass on my left ovary, underwent surgery, was diagnosed with a malignant teratoma, and began a six-month regimen of chemotherapy. As I received my diploma on graduation day, my hair was beginning to fall out in small tufts from under my mortarboard.

What stays with me from that final stretch of college is the support I received from friends, professors, and university administrators alike. While I was reeling from my diagnosis, my academic dean arranged for my midterm grades to hold as my final grades. Thus, my coursework was, practically speaking, complete six weeks early. But as an art major, I had been looking forward to my senior exhibition for four years and was not willing to sit it out. I had planned an installation of a large attic room—an homage to the nineteenth century feminist literary trope of the madwoman in the attic<sup>1</sup>—, with pages of text strewn on the floor within and fluttering out a broken window to the gallery floor below. Like the imagined woman within the attic room, I had a story yet to tell, one that had become all the more urgent after my diagnosis.

However, in the weeks leading to the exhibition opening, I was too weak from surgery and chemotherapy to complete the project on my own, so the call

went out. A dozen friends, and friends of friends, gathered in my studio to carry the massive unfinished attic structure across campus to the art gallery for assembly. My father, an engineer, drove from Massachusetts to New Jersey to assist. Within two days, I was applying the finishing touches. At the show's opening, people stepped up into the dark paper-filled attic, crouched down and peered out the window, their gaze following the flow of pages to the floor below.

Reflecting back, I realize that my rejection of the tendency to yoke disease, particularly those identified as women's illnesses, with silence and stigma began in college when I decided to move forward with my exhibition. As I have faced other health crises since cancer, including multiple sclerosis and long COVID, one could say that I have been pushing pages of text out broken windows throughout my life in an effort to create meaning out of a life lived with—indeed, in spite of—illness. That possibility though cannot be realized alone, absent a focalizing community. Understanding personal crises within a communal, even global, context has shaped my work as both a writer and as a teacher of writing and literature.

When COVID-19 spread through the New York metropolitan region in March 2020, I found myself inhabiting two seemingly incongruent roles—as a severely ill patient and as a professor supporting students through the crisis. Yet my illness, rather than pulling my attention off of my teaching, heightened my capacity for empathy—for my students, as well as for everyone struggling to find their footing in the overwhelming moment. I chose to devote time each day to documenting and processing my sickness through writing, recognizing that my personal experience was part of a much larger communal trauma. I swiftly shifted my teaching priorities in anticipation of the challenges and scarcities that my students would face, paring down my spring course assignments and making space to respond to each student's needs. But when my summer 2020 creative writing class began in mid-May, I recognized that my students and I had shifted out of the initial survival mode and were finding our footing in a kind of survivance, as we, each at our own pace, located personal agency and endurance. Thus, I saw an opportunity to push forward even yet again by modeling my summer teaching on the daily writing practice that had sustained me throughout my illness. I guided my students as they wrote their way through, first, the upheaval of the pandemic, and then of the public death of George Floyd and the social unrest that followed. The habitual activity of writing propelled them, allowing space to reflect and process *as writers* the compounding traumas of 2020, culminating in collaborative meditations on uncertainty and loss. The experience of teaching through the early months of my COVID-19 illness, draining as it was at times, has had a transformative impact on my pedagogy, as I witnessed how students faced with profound instability wrote through their fears and grief, and found the communal in the individual as they opened themselves up to their classmates and to me.

## LOCKED DOWN: TEACHING THROUGH PAST EMERGENCIES

Over the years I have often drawn on the memory of finishing college while sick with cancer as I help my college students navigate moments of crisis. But in spring 2020, as COVID-19 spread through the New York City region where I teach at New Jersey City University (NJCU), two more recent collective traumas resurfaced as I anticipated my students' needs: the devastation of Superstorm Sandy in 2012 and a mass casualty shooting at a kosher deli near campus just months before COVID hit.

In fall 2012, Superstorm Sandy left residents throughout the New York metropolitan area without power for days and even weeks, and flooded homes. In the aftermath, NJCU suspended classes for two weeks, but students' focus remained disrupted long after we returned. Many students' families lost their homes and income, and school suddenly shifted to a low priority. It was the first communal crisis I experienced with my students in Jersey City, and I witnessed firsthand how many of them maintain finely balanced lives—pull one strand from the delicate web and everything comes undone. Some of my students never regained their footing in their classes after Superstorm Sandy hit early that semester in 2012, and some dropped out of college altogether.

A more recent event occurred the afternoon of December 10, 2019, as I was holding a celebratory end-of-semester group reading in my fall Memoir class, when a heavily armed couple opened fire on a kosher deli in a horrific antisemitic attack just blocks from our Jersey City campus. My class was in an interior conference room, so we did not hear the massive gunfire as others on campus did, or see the SWAT teams and police from New York City and surrounding towns race to the scene. We learned of the siege only after campus went into lockdown.

My students and I hurried into two windowless offices deep within the building and waited anxiously for news of assailants possibly still on the loose. I learned through text notifications that the entire region was on lockdown. My daughters, one at school two miles away and the other in a neighboring town, and I texted to relay that we were each in a safe place, and my students communicated with their families as well. Two savvy students tuned in to the police scanner online, craving information in order to remain calm, while the sound of it—including reports of powerful explosive devices found on the scene—caused another young woman to have a panic attack. A call with her frantic parents who had driven toward campus to retrieve her, only to be stopped by police roadblocks, escalated the student's concern. I quietly reminded a classmate who found her response overblown that her fear—and the threat itself—was real and that we each respond to danger differently. As I moved to sit on the floor with the student in distress

and offer quiet reassurance until her breathing calmed, I asked those with the scanner to turn it off.

In the office next door, the other half of the class continued to listen to reports and kept us abreast of developments via text messages. After an hour or two, we felt secure that the danger was subsiding, that the explosives had been safely removed, and that there was no chance anyone would enter campus undetected given the heavy police presence outside. We collectively decided to turn from our individual screens, which had provided us with vital information and connections to loved ones, and back toward one another. We gathered in a hallway far removed from the locked doors of the department and, seated on the floor, resumed our reading. This was a welcome reprieve from the danger outside and reminded us of the vital fifteen-week journey we had taken together examining difficult memories and shaping them into stories to be shared. Not long after, the lockdown was lifted and we were cleared to leave; the gunmen had been killed. We sighed in nervous relief, gathered for a photograph to document the harrowing afternoon, and left the building.

Although there were on-campus commemorations for the four shooting victims, I keenly felt the absence of an opportunity to reconnect with my students in person and process the violent hate crime we had experienced together. I longed to sit with them once more and write. I have often wondered how that afternoon in its many manifestations, from our class reading, to the digital connections to family off campus, to the sounds of the police scanner, to the hate that erupted into bloodshed in our neighborhood, and more, has figured into my memoir writers' stories.

When the pandemic enveloped us a few months later and the very word *lockdown* took on new meaning, I continued to think about those students and how their needs were both individual and evolving, as were our literacy acts, through the course of that afternoon. Indeed, in Spring 2020, when COVID-19 directly impacted our area, with the murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd following soon after, I knew that not one of us would be unaffected by the upheavals of our socio-cultural moment but that each of us would be affected differently. I thought of the heterogeneous needs and responses found even among the students I had sheltered with during the December attack. As with Superstorm Sandy, when some lost power for two days while others lost their homes and financial security, COVID would not impact us evenly. And recalling my own history as a student with cancer, I recognized that people might have different capacities for different activities. In emergency situations, students need compassion and flexibility, as well as guidance as they locate new uses of literacy and creativity as means of survival. And they need a community in which they feel secure enough to exhale, even as the larger crisis continues to rage.

## COVID DESCENDS: A SPRING LIKE NO OTHER

As my students and I said goodbye for our anticipated week-long spring break in March 2020, the novel coronavirus looming large in the news still seemed far away. However, the reality of the pandemic set in quickly for me: when NJCU announced on March 11, 2020 that classes would move online for an anticipated two weeks following break, my 16-year-old daughter Molly was already sick with a fever and a dry, hacking cough. Despite decades of experience navigating the health care system, as well as statements from the White House (later proven to be inaccurate) about the availability of testing, I could not secure the care or test my daughter needed.<sup>2</sup> I imagined others were facing similar obstacles and doubted the low official case counts. So I turned to the most potent tool in my arsenal: I began writing. The day before NJCU resumed classes online, I published an essay in *The Huffington Post* about my inability to get Molly tested, presenting my family's burgeoning health crisis as indicative of a national problem.

As I cared for Molly, I worried about my students, most of whom are vulnerable first-generation college students with few safety nets. I did not know what might have transpired in their lives over spring break, but I knew to reenter my now-virtual classrooms with a keen ear for the unspoken trials they were facing. Meanwhile, because I had experience teaching online, some of my colleagues asked my advice on establishing online discussion boards, peer review procedures, and other course elements. With each query, I grew increasingly uneasy that many were moving their classes online as if they were teaching under ordinary circumstances, just in a different format. This was not a useful approach. No set of standard guidelines could accommodate the new needs of our students, many of whom might already be sick. Just miles from the rapidly expanding epicenter of the pandemic in the United States, we needed to be prepared for the multifocal emergency that COVID would present for our students. From my stance as the parent of a sick teenager, I witnessed a level of magical thinking as if all but our course delivery method would remain the same. Of course, we all quickly learned otherwise.

My friend Rebecca Barrett-Fox (2020) voiced many of those concerns in a March 12, 2020 blog post, "Please do a bad job of putting your course online," which quickly garnered national attention for its no nonsense, compassionate advice. She makes clear that we were embarking on emergency remote learning, not traditional online teaching, and that our students were not necessarily prepared for this delivery method nor would they be learning under ordinary circumstances. With the sudden lockdown, whole families were living, working, and learning at home together, often in cramped quarters with limited, if any, computer and internet access. Students were either losing their jobs or dealing

with increased hours in high-risk work environments. Many had family members to care for. And, everyone, bar none, was feeling heightened anxiety. As Barrett-Fox (2020) instructed us, “You are NOT building an online class. You are NOT teaching students who can be expected to be ready to learn online. And, most importantly, your class is NOT the highest priority of their OR your life right now,” reminding us also that students or their loved ones may be sick. Barrett-Fox affirmed my instinct to be mindful of my students’ noncognitive needs as we entered into uncharted territory. As teachers we needed to prepare for shifting priorities as we waded into the unfolding crisis.

## TEACHING THROUGH COVID: A DELICATE BALANCE

As we have learned belatedly, teaching through the pandemic took a significant toll on the mental health of teachers; teaching students in crisis, and doing so remotely and without preparation, was overwhelming. Indeed, the greater our empathy and carework for our students, the more difficult it was to find balance in a situation in which we could not help but take our work home with us because work and home had merged. Thus, what I had not anticipated when I streamlined my courses, was that Barrett-Fox’s advice would be a lifesaver for me as much as for my students. At the start of the pandemic, as I toggled my attention between my health and my students, I relied on and benefited from the pared down framework of my classes as much as my students did.

Indeed, lockdown teaching overlaid completely with serious illness for me. On the second day of remote classes, I began experiencing chest pain and pressure, which escalated by the weekend. The following week, I headed to the emergency room with increased pain and shortness of breath. I was sent home that night with a presumed positive case of COVID-19; the next day, I received the test result to confirm it.

A few days later, concerned I would become worse before I recovered, I wrote to my students:

I have mentioned to a few of you that I have not been feeling well, and I had earlier posted an article that I wrote about my teenage daughter being sick. Molly has been sick for about three weeks now, and I have not been feeling well for a week or so—and I learned on Thursday that I tested positive for COVID-19 (I’m still waiting on Molly’s results but I am sure she has it too). It was not a surprise, but it is upsetting even so.

The symptoms for COVID-19 tend to worsen in the second week, so I’m guessing I might feel a bit worse before I get better, so I’m hoping you can bear with me. If you send me a message and I don’t reply soon, feel free to text me through Remind. I would like to continue teaching our class, rather than hand it off to someone else, as we have come so

far and, in many ways, are in our home stretch. And also, I survived cancer in my twenties and I have MS, so if there's one thing I know how to do, it's live with illness.

Within hours, I was back in the Emergency Room with severe hypoxia and difficulty maintaining consciousness. I could not walk unassisted or speak more than a few words, and my limbs had an uncontrollable tremor. By this point, the virus had taken hold of my city, and the hospital was full for all but the most life-threatening cases. As sick as I was, I was sent home with instructions to stay in bed; for weeks after, walking just a few steps would cause my oxygen levels to drop dangerously low.

That weekend in late March, I weighed my health against my students' needs. My doctor warned me that, given my multiple sclerosis, my recovery might take a month (in actuality, my bedrest alone would last two months). Moving forward, I rotated through my classes, focusing on one each day, as the work of teaching strained my limited mental capacity. Speaking remained difficult, so I all but abandoned instructional videos for a few weeks, reserving them for material not easily delivered in writing. Deadlines became permeable, one rolling into the next without penalty.

Despite my well-laid plans, I felt continual tension between my needs and my students'. My health was cause for concern until the end of April when I was able to secure supplemental oxygen at home. So I kept my students informed about my condition as needed, careful not to burden them with my crisis while still acknowledging our shared vulnerability, and I learned to extend the same grace that I was offering my students when I fell ill. Although I fully appreciate that others might—and often should—make a different decision in a similar situation, I did not want to give up my classes unless absolutely necessary. I worried, how could I bring someone else up to speed on each student's personal needs? How would my students hold their tenuous footing with a new instructor? Moreover, my illness gave me an important perspective on college classes at that moment. We all, students, faculty and staff, were struggling. I wanted to be present at the end of the semester to celebrate with my students, and I wanted to help them get there. I never imagined though that I would be sick for the remainder of that semester and for the duration of my summer class, as I fell into the not-yet-designated category of COVID Longhailer.

## COMMUNITY IN CRISIS: SHIFTING OUR PRIORITIES

In their work on the scarcity mindset, Sendhil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir (2013) discuss the far-reaching impacts of not having enough, whether food, money, time, or any other resource. They explain that “because we are preoccupied



by scarcity, because our minds constantly return to it, we have less mind to give to the rest of life. This is more than a metaphor” (13). We become preoccupied with what we need to the point that we have no bandwidth left for other concerns and even our perception—of time, of information, of others’ abundance—becomes distorted. My personal experience of scarcity of health and safety at this time had left me fixated on absorbing research and policy information on COVID-19. This tunnel vision was a useful survival mechanism, but I recognized the deficits it left me with. And I could easily transfer that scenario to my students’ lives.

My concern for my students was that they would be so acutely focused on very real challenges related to money, safety, health, community and other things that the pandemic was stripping from them, that they would be operating in a crisis mode unable to process anything else. As I balanced my capacity for teaching while sick, I remained mindful of the multiple ways my students might need support and flexibility, each in their own way, as COVID took hold. Later in this collection, Nicole I. Caswell and Rebecca E. Johnson discuss similar observations about their writing tutors during the pandemic, arguing that learning during crises is not normal, or even possible, so we must adjust our pedagogy to make space for acknowledging students’ emotions. Kim Liao further explains in her essay, “Staring at the Sun,” that the brain’s reaction to trauma, in which the limbic system overrides the cerebral cortex makes learning all but impossible. Anticipating the pandemic’s widespread devastation, often coupled with acute trauma, I kept my goals modest. I resolved to keep my students on track and in school, even if that required drastically redefining what “on track” meant. This accomplishment alone had the potential to move them toward survivance, a state in which they could be proud of their endurance.

Our first day online, I posted a long announcement on Blackboard, our course management system, for each of my three classes, containing this statement:

### A NEW WORLD / SHIFTING PRIORITIES

I can trust that we all have a lot on our minds right now, and your classes have probably fallen pretty far down in your list of priorities. You do not have to feel bad or embarrassed about that. It is reality. You might have children or your siblings to care for now that schools are closed, or older relatives who need your support doing errands or caring for them. You might have increased or decreased work hours—and either of those scenarios is stressful. You might be more worried than usual about money, and you are not alone in that! You might be sick, or someone you love might be—and, regardless of the nature of the illness, it is very frightening to have ANY kind of illness right now. In fact, it’s so frightening that many of us might literally become sick from the anxiety itself.

My point is, school is not a top priority for most of us right now because so many other things are demanding our attention. Your priority is taking care of yourself and your loved ones. That said, I’m hoping we can keep moving forward at a pace that works for us in our class.



Before I could devise a plan forward, I needed to know what was happening in my students' lives. Thus, I created a confidential needs assessment survey, asking about technology and internet access, along with several voluntary questions about increased care work, financial challenges, and health concerns. I emphasized that this information would enable me to tailor the remainder of the semester around student needs and circumstances, technological or otherwise. Much of the information I requested was personal in nature, but perhaps my openness about my daughter's (and soon, my own) illness encouraged reciprocity. Our eight weeks together before our semester split into *before* and *after*, during which we developed in-person relationships and I had come to know my students' capabilities, proved vital for what lay ahead.

The survey results were crushing but not unexpected. Forty-seven of the fifty-four students in my three classes completed the questionnaire. Three of the remaining seven students contacted me much later, sharing difficult personal situations that kept them from continuing with classes after spring break; I never heard back from the other four. Respondents conveyed relief and gratitude at being asked how they were doing, and most wrote lengthy responses to my final open-ended question about special concerns. Several even thanked me for checking on them and allowing them to share their personal worries. I gathered that many professors had moved classes online seemingly without missing a beat, and students were struggling mightily to make that transition with them.

My survey results showed why. Thirty-two of my students, or 74% of respondents, were now caring for others. This included, as examples, a single mother with three children, a young man caring for his disabled mother at risk of serious illness, and another serving as primary caregiver for her severely disabled non-verbal brother. Further, most students were worried about their jobs, either the loss or elimination of hours or the high level of exposure at work in supermarkets and restaurants. Additionally, a troubling but unsurprising number of my first-year composition students did not have reliable computer and/or internet access at home. Nearly half could access Blackboard only through their phones. I shared free wifi offers and arranged for delivery of donated laptops to two students, and had another ready; unfortunately, that student, realizing my worst fears, dropped out of contact. It was only at the end of the semester that I heard back from her; she had been suddenly displaced from her home when her sister fell ill with COVID, and, without a laptop or her textbooks, she had given up on her classes.

## PARING DOWN: RECOGNIZING STUDENTS' NEEDS

In a more contained emergency that did not impact every element of students' lives and shut down the nation, it might have been possible for students to make

their way through on their own by adapting to their limitations. But in spring 2020, handing such a freedom to my students would have been neither kind nor useful. If we remain closely attuned to our students' needs and ask very specifically about the challenges before them, then, as teachers, we know when to take things off students' plates and when to leave open the option to do more. The real work of teaching through crises happens at the human level. More than anything, our students need to know that someone is watching out for them, and that their mental and physical security is more valuable to us than their schoolwork.

The candid survey responses confirmed one thing: my students were not okay. I needed to drastically adjust my expectations for the semester. As I trimmed my syllabi, my approach was simple: anything we did not absolutely need to cover would be eliminated. But what, in a global pandemic, shutdown, and financial crisis, is a teaching necessity? What activities would students have bandwidth for? I retained core elements of each class while easing the cognitive and intellectual workload by revamping in-class assignments and presentations for asynchronous digital learning, reworking a research paper to emphasize practice over product, reimagining more timely topics for our investigation,<sup>3</sup> and loosening all deadlines and grading criteria.

More significantly, my students and I began to communicate—all through writing—in new ways. Because so many students had trouble with internet connectivity, I sent class announcements and checked in on individual students via text messages, which they received on their phones. As I crafted messages via text, my language changed and so did the level of intimacy. We made the abrupt transition from in-class conversations and online discussion boards involving the full class, to one-on-one exchanges. Students contacted me at all hours of day and night, and because none of us was sleeping properly and all were on high alert, I was likely to respond to a late-night text within minutes. Students volunteered information about the depth of their anxiety, the long hours staring into space or playing video games, the insomnia, the worries about vulnerable family members, and more. They turned to the most immediate communication medium available to lay bare their emotions and let me know that they were struggling.

As I listened to my students, I affirmed the weight of their experiences and offered accommodations for those in acute crisis. I did not want anyone to feel they must choose between their health or security and their schoolwork. For instance, one student had three children, all sick with COVID, including one in the hospital. I gave her the option of taking an incomplete, but she wanted to complete her work during the semester. So I guided her through a rudimentary research project at her own pace, offering gentle feedback not for revision but with an eye toward future classes. Another student did not log into Blackboard or reply to texts for several weeks. When he finally resurfaced, I learned he had been in a dangerous living situation; we agreed that he would submit a few representative

pieces of work and be done. Yet another dropped out of touch and returned to tell me he had been sick with a debilitating presumed case of COVID. We were discussing an alternate set of requirements when he turned a corner toward recovery and completed his work in a flurry of activity. A few others confided that they had paralyzing anxiety yet—like their peers—they were determined to finish their coursework. For each of these students, I slashed requirements and, following the generosity I had been afforded years earlier, committed to assigning final grades no lower than what they had earned at midterm.

On the other end of experience, in my upper-level Literature of Genocide class, I adapted, rather than eliminating, a large pop-up installation into a digital project because many students, most of them seniors, had been eager to complete it. Those who wished to collaborate could, and I invited students to take the assignment as far as they wished without penalizing those who did not have the bandwidth or interest to do more than was required. With student consent I shared one of the more robust finished group projects, a podcast, on the department's social media, providing those students with the wider audience that had been central to the original assignment.

## BEYOND SURVIVANCE: ON WRITING OUR WAY THROUGH

In that most challenging spring my students engaged in acts of literacy—sending me messages to check in, to convey despair, to ask for compassion—as a means of survivance, coupling survival with resilience or endurance, as first described by Native American scholar Gerard Vizenor. Like the class I sheltered in place with just months earlier, when in-person contact was not possible, we turned to the devices in our hands to check in and connect as humans. And as we transitioned out of the overwhelming early period of upheaval and my health stabilized, spring classes ended and my online summer creative writing class began. We shifted, together, out of survival mode. By summer, though the student/teacher barriers were still lowered, I was no longer texting with students or replying to messages at all hours. Indeed, my students no longer needed such a relationship with me. I saw the opportunity to now use writing in more reflective, creative ways and designed my summer syllabus to be responsive to the realities of the moment. I encouraged students, through my assignments, to regard writing as a vehicle that might carry them through crisis, just as I had been doing since the start of the pandemic. Indeed, just as I had been doing for years.

I have maintained a strict daily writing practice for several years, which has been personally and professionally transformative. My capacity as a writer has expanded during personal health crises, for I find writing to be a vehicle that both takes me deeper into the visceral experience of illness *and* gives me distance

from it. On days when I have struggled to find motivation, I have thought of Audre Lorde diagnosed with breast cancer in the 1970s (see Lorde, 1980) or Susan Gubar facing ovarian cancer more recently (see Gubar, 2012), writers who each committed to bearing witness while severely ill in order to help others. Thus, when my daughter became sick with COVID, the decision to give voice to our experience came easily. And when I fell ill, I continued writing through acute COVID, publicly on social media and more intimately through poetry.<sup>4</sup> Like Lorde and Gubar, I knew our story would be of use to others.

In April 2020, two weeks into my illness, I began composing a poem each day for National Poetry Month. My COVID series, which I continued, albeit less consistently, through spring and summer, is a time capsule of images: the terrifying cycles of breathlessness, insomnia, and pain; the sounds of sirens in my city overlaid by birdsong and my daughter's relentless cough; the horrifying visuals relayed by my fiancé, a funeral director, of overflowing morgues and distraught families. I gave myself room to assign language and rhythm to the personal and the global colliding in my narrowly focused life. In mid-April, I wrote about my students:

To My Students in the Time of the Novel Coronavirus

I know you are struggling, that you had  
already fought and kicked to make it  
to spring break, to the week when we would  
all come up for air before the final push  
of a hard semester. But break week this year  
was a last gasp, right before our class was sliced  
in two—into before, into after,  
when the fragile balance of everything  
you were holding together, while holding  
your breath, shattered, as if a cat had walked  
across the shelf where your most precious  
pieces were perched and casually swatted them  
one by one, to the floor. We are stuck here  
frozen, staring at the glassy shards,  
knowing we cannot scoop the thousand  
pieces into our hands and mold them back  
into January or February, when life was sharp  
and fragile but not broken.

I know you are struggling, and though I will  
not tell you this, I know you will continue  
to struggle. So much has shattered.

But I will not tell you because you are  
surrounded by shimmering dust

that reflects off your face in ways  
 that we could not see before. And for every  
 piece of you that has broken, a new angle  
 becomes visible. And what I know  
 is that you are present and fighting,  
 and that though you are struggling,  
 you will not be broken. (2020)

At the time I wrote this poem, one month into the pandemic lockdown, I was witnessing a slight shift in my students. They were still struggling, but they were finding ways to do more than just survive. Creative self-imagining can occur precisely in our darkest moments, enabling us to reflect and visualize a path forward.<sup>5</sup> Bolstered by the continual reassurance that they could make it through and eased by lightened class requirements, my students dug deep for the resolve to continue. They gradually emerged, one by one, out of a scarcity mindset where so many had been paralyzed by anxiety and responsibilities. While their material circumstances had not improved—they were still caring for family members, working in unsafe environments or out of work, struggling with limited wifi, and so on—their field of vision was expanding. They were imagining a way through.

I largely kept my writing separate from my teaching in spring 2020, and I neither asked nor required my students to document their own experiences through the early days of the pandemic. I did not have the wherewithal to bring them on that journey when I was in the throes of acute illness, plus it felt wholly inappropriate to ask this of students in crisis. Nonetheless, those who were able to find distance and to respond creatively, often by partnering with others such as in my genocide literature class, shined in their work. To be sure, not everyone can do this in every instance, but almost everyone has had an experience of achieving goals that seem out of reach, even unrealistic. In spring 2020 though, the vast majority of my students focused on meeting the class requirements, and that was enough.

My ten-week summer class, “Creative Writing in a Digital Age,” however, presented a new opportunity. Creative writing allows us to find words and create order where there once was neither. Traumatic experiences in particular are often thought to defy articulation, but I find that the attempt to give shape to pain via narrative or poetry is often healing. Writing offers a container for that which otherwise may remain chaotic and overwhelming. Moreover, scholars of illness narratives, including Arthur Frank and Rita Charon, and trauma theorists such as Dori Laub and Cathy Caruth espouse the importance of bearing witness to crisis. In summer 2020, the time felt right for this work. In her essay “The Single Most Essential Requirement in Designing a Fall Online Course,” Cathy Davidson (2020) urges pandemic instructors to “begin from the premise that our students are learning from a place of dislocation, anxiety, uncertainty, awareness

of social injustice, anger, and trauma. So are we.” She goes on, “We need to build our courses thinking about the opposite of an emotional burden: empowerment, agency, community, care.” Davidson’s advice helped me cement an idea I had been formulating: in order for the class to be meaningful, our historical moment needed to sit front and center in the course. The pandemic and its impact must not be an obstacle or source of shame for students but the basis for why we write. I expressed this on page one of our syllabus:

This semester, we will all feel, in unique ways, the reality of our collective and individual trauma, anxiety, and possible health problems stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic. These concerns will impact our work together, and I do not want us to think of them as competing or interfering with our activities. Instead, we will use our course topic – Creative Writing in a Digital Age – as both an inspiration and a foundation for writing about, and in response to, what is happening in the world and in our lives right now.

For many of us, life feels precarious now. So let’s take that as our common ground starting point and use it as the basis for many of our activities. Creative writing has the power and capacity to change our experience in the world and provides us with ways to respond to the world. Let’s use our voices this summer and write ourselves into the picture. We each have stories to tell. So let’s tell them.

I was eager to guide my students in writing their way through the summer as the rawness of the pandemic settled into routine, lockdown restrictions were partially lifted, and we were all learning to literally and metaphorically breathe more easily. However, the horrific death of George Floyd occurred one week into our semester, filling our minds and hearts with images from his final suffocating minutes and sparking powerful social protests nationwide. With a class comprised almost entirely of people of color, I did not press students into writing about Floyd. Kristina Aravelo, in her essay in this collection on Anti-Asian hate crimes, and Kim Liao, in her chapter on confronting trauma, argue that we must safeguard our mental well-being in times of trauma or crisis and be careful to avoid re-traumatization. Like Liao though, I left the door open, inviting students who felt the need or desire to address systemic racism and Floyd’s murder to do so through our upcoming assignments. This trauma was new and raw; I expected some students would need to keep a distance from it, yet most gravitated toward it.

One of our first assignments was a mask project, in which I asked students to compose a four-line poem, print it onto a face mask of their own design, and photograph themselves wearing it.<sup>6</sup> Masks had become bearers of silent messages that spring, particularly in light of the politicization of COVID safety protocols; in the wake of the very public murder of George Floyd, they resonated in yet other ways, as protestors wore face coverings with messages such as “I can’t breathe” or “Black Lives Matter” printed or scrawled on them. Given the opportunity to

voice, indeed to *wear*, their pain as people of color living in the United States, almost every student wrote their vulnerability into their mask poems.

As we moved onto other graphic and constraint-based poetic forms,<sup>7</sup> students kept writing through the racial violence, coupled with pandemic losses, in the United States. They created concrete poems in the shapes of a gun and a casket, flarf poems comprised of headlines, erasure poems using source material they found on their own, including Amiri Baraka's controversial poem "Somebody Blew Up America," "The Soldier's Creed," and various articles on injustice and pandemic restrictions, critically recasting the original texts by removing select words and phrases. While the weekly assignments required students to work within the confines of prescribed forms, the free rein on subject matter and source material offered a window into the matters pressing on their psyches. They poured themselves into the constraints of each week's assigned form, perhaps relieved to have a figurative container for the emotions of a summer of distress, loss, and anger.

For our final project, I assigned a collaborative "exquisite corpse" poem that allowed students' voices to build off of one another. Exquisite corpse is an avant-garde artistic form, in which multiple artists (or poets) work progressively. Traditionally, using a tri-folded paper, an artist would draw a head and neck in the top segment, then hand the folded sheet to the next artist, with only the edge of the drawing revealed. That person would draw a torso, then hand the folded paper to the final person who would draw legs and feet. At its most magical and whimsical, the unfolded sheet might reveal, say, the head of a fire-breathing dragon, the torso of a spider, and the legs of an anteater, with each segment connected seamlessly to the next.

For our poetic variation, I asked each student to write a four-line stanza on the theme of "in the air," each line with its own requirement (simile or metaphor, sensory imagery, alliteration or assonance, and personification). I plotted a multi-day writing schedule: the first student began with stanza one, and emailed only her final line to student two, who wrote a stanza building off of that line and sent his final line to the next student, and so on, until every student had contributed a stanza knowing only the immediately preceding line. Additionally, I asked students to film themselves reading their stanza. I compiled the submissions and edited the recorded segments into a video of the full poem and uploaded it, with end credits, on YouTube.<sup>8</sup> The finished piece is a powerful collaborative meditation on uncertainty and loss:

In the Air: Summer 2020

The air grew heavy like a full heart.  
Burnt wood and salted winds.

Summer's scent suspended  
By our shield from a taunting disease

His knees like a rope choke noose  
Glazed Eyes in the Stench of Hate  
Moaning Mama quiets the World  
The Pavement Demands Movement

Movement like the body is free  
Summer breeze, fluffy cherry blossoms on trees  
Let's take a walk and talk, feeling earth's vibrations on our feet  
Listening to this summer breeze sing melodies

Summer 2020 looks empty.  
Music is louder than the streets.  
Music strings were strong  
Songs dancing in our heads

Summer heat, beautiful as a pageant queen  
It smells as vibrant as the desert heat  
Ice cream trucks, children's laughter frolicking  
The trees at a standstill, bees planting danger

our skin is as golden as the sand  
the trees smell like a new baby  
swoosh swash  
the ocean and i kiss deeply

Your love is as light as cloud yet heavier than life itself  
The smell of mint from your breath blooms in the morning sun  
as a tulip does in the spring dew  
Beauty benefited by beloved beholder  
Light is envious of the darkness that touches you upon sleep

Dusk is as important as dawn  
The sweet smell of a hard work day-done  
Drifting, drifting, drifted  
Darkness is fleeting and wants to be loved

Just like yin and yang, darkness meets the light  
The blinding light beams through the cracks  
The lonely light learns to love the darkness  
The light of the moon protects the darkness



But blood still stains the concrete like oil,  
 The smell of metal covering the dark  
 Tears that tumble and tilt, turn to make room  
 The night takes off his hat and stays a while.

In this riveting poem, we begin in daytime, enveloped in the thick oppressive air, the ordinary scents of summer blocked by our masks, and are swiftly confronted with the knee snuffing the life from George Floyd, moaning for his mama on the pavement in broad daylight. But “pavement demands movement,” and by stanza three the writer has heard the call and we are walking and talking, thinking about freedom. The poets soon introduce love, light and hope: children are laughing, trees smell like new babies, the speaker kisses the ocean. Gradually darkness is introduced, offering moments for reflection amid unrest. We read that “dusk is as important as the dawn,” conveying that we endure the darkness in order to reach the next day. And when, in the end, “the night takes off his hat and stays for a while,” we sense that there is work to be done in this long night before a new dawn breaks. The compiled voices of these poets take us from the despair of daylight into the sobering wisdom of night. Collectively, the students, each working with only a hint of what the poet before had written, turn light and dark imagery on its head, finding hope and potential in their shared reflection of a national crisis.

That summer, students wrote not just to fulfill their class requirements, but by confronting the issues that were weighing on them each week, they created important individual, and collective, testimony to a uniquely difficult time. At the end of the course, a few students confessed they had initially been hesitant about creative writing, and some had been wary of engaging with their emotions. Yet as the weeks passed, they channeled their powerful responses to current events creatively, using writing not just as a means of survivance but as a tool for imagining a way through. The collective poem “In the Air” is a somber, beautiful memorial to summer 2020. The poem holds brave and painful images yet brings us to a quiet landing point, offering a fitting metaphor for our semester’s journey. And although I did not plan it as such, it was moving that in the video of “In the Air” at the end of our asynchronously taught semester, we heard each others’ voices for the first time.

## BREATHING LESSONS: ON EMPATHY AND GROWTH

In the early months of the pandemic, when classes moved online and I became severely ill with COVID-19, I had one goal, both metaphorical and literal: survival. My uncertain health mirrored the precarious situations of my students.

In that moment, empathy and kindness were paramount, so I pared down our workload and course requirements, and focused my limited energy on crisis management, communicating directly with students to offer whatever supports they needed. Although there were bright moments when students shined and when they drew on the community we had built before lockdown, most of my students withdrew in solitude, choosing to communicate directly with me as the group discussion boards I had optimistically created in March sat empty. Making it through the semester, in whatever form of survivance that took for each individual student, was the victory.

However, several weeks later, when my summer class began, I set my sights beyond survivance, for both my students and for myself. We had come through the pandemic's first overwhelming hit and had each elected to engage in a summer of creative writing. As I planned the course, I reflected on how my writing had evolved through my illness. During my acute COVID, the craft of poetry, with its capacity to capture pain and uncertainty, had provided a crucial self-preserving distance from disease. By mid-May, the telltale mental fog and exhaustion of COVID were lifting, my breathing was stabilizing, and I slowly began composing narrative essays. The moment was ripe for reflection, processing, and for sharing—and not just for me. We were living through a singular moment, and I was confident that my summer students would be willing to follow me into the work of writing through it. What I did not anticipate was how devastatingly that moment would change with the death of George Floyd. Yet, despite being given complete freedom over content, every single student took the risk of diving into anxious sensations of a suffocating, terror-filled summer and of sharing their work with their classmates. For, as we learned together in summer 2020, there was no way of writing our way around the seismic activities—the global pandemic, the horrific murder of George Floyd, the Black Lives Matter protests, the COVID deniers and anti-mask movement, the 2020 election campaigns—that were rocking our nation. So instead we wrote our way through them. And we did more than merely survive. We grew.

Pandemic teaching led me to reflect on my values as an instructor and deepen my commitment to empathy as a pedagogical guide. Although my early COVID infection and the challenges I faced with the dearth of testing and information initially sparked the concern that my students might also be sick despite reported case counts, I knew that illness was but one of many challenges they were facing. I could not in good conscience sidestep that reality, asking students to set aside their palpable and justified anxieties within the space of the classroom. Such a move would have been the antithesis of responsive and responsible teaching. Throughout my career I have been committed to meeting my students where they are, and at no time is that more critical than during emergencies.

We cannot teach as if students are not impacted by the world around them, or as if our course content, regardless of our discipline and specialty, might exist apart from current events. Students' noncognitive needs deserve space in the classroom, so we must leave openings for their voices and listen when they tell us how they are being impacted by events personal or global. But it requires flexibility and a willingness to jettison the notion of a syllabus as a document that can be reused semester after semester. Instead, it means planning each semester with an ear toward overlaps between course material and current events, and it means entering the classroom, whether it is in person or online, each day open to the possibility of changing course. This is an intensive kind of teaching that decenters the instructor as bearer of knowledge and moves her into a more empathetic role. But truly, our students deserve no less. And this openness might infuse new life into our work as teachers, create deeper understandings of what matters to our students, and, if we are lucky, offer them room to breathe.

## NOTES

- 1 Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's seminal 1979 work *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* analyzes the creative rebellious female figures of women's fiction, as set against the normative nineteenth century angelic heroines.
- 2 At March 9, 2020 news conference, the White House reported that one million people in the United States would be tested that week; in reality, only 4,000 tests were administered in that time.
- 3 For instance, in *Literature of Genocide*, I incorporated discussion of "Beyond Social Distancing: Understanding Discrimination during the Coronavirus Pandemic," an online event held by the Museum of Jewish Heritage. Offering analysis of the increase in anti-Asian hate crimes and the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on people of color in the United States, panelists allowed us to consider how hate can transform and spread in deadly ways, how systemic inequities veer into the terrain of genocide, whether health care is a human right, and more.
- 4 My published writings on COVID, as well as media appearances, are all available on my website <https://AnnWallacePhD.com>.
- 5 I have written about this in more detail in "A Life Less Terrifying: The Revisionary Lens of Illness," *Intima: A Journal of Narrative Medicine*, Spring 2016.
- 6 The mask assignment was inspired by a series of decorative masks that my friend Mark McBeth began making during the pandemic. Not intended as functional PPE, his fantastical, highly adorned masks led me to think of the creative potential of masks.
- 7 The poetic forms we were worked with are each governed by constraints or rules, which add a game-like challenge inviting to those new (and not so new) to poetry. Additionally, most use found material, which allowed students to critique existing texts through disruption. For instance, writers of flarf collage (sometimes nonsensically and usually irreverently) lines pulled from internet searches or from found sources, and blackout and erasure poems create meaning by redacting lines from source texts in order to draw attention to underlying meanings and images. Concrete poems are original poems composed in the literal shape of objects. In each of these

forms, the poem's meaning might sit in tension or coordination with the form, or the piece might provide creative commentary on its source material.

8 "In the Air: Summer 2020" can be viewed on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/Elyhk86By4>.

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