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Life and Lemons: Struggling with Productivity During a Pandemic

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Life and Lemons: Struggling with Productivity During a Pandemic

Cover Page Footnote

I want to provide a special thanks to Dr. Florence E. Babb for support, grace and kindness during the initial pandemic semester when I wrote this paper. Thank you for creating a space to work through the class material while acknowledging where I was.

Life and Lemons: Struggling with Productivity During a Pandemic

I sat back down on the sofa, ready to draw a portrait of the man with no face. But I had no idea where to begin, or how to get started. There was only a void, and how are you supposed to give form to something that does not exist?

– Haruki Murakami, *Killing Commendatore*

You lot! What? Don't stop! Give it all you got!

– The Clash, “The Magnificent Seven”

On Wednesday, March 4, 2020, I went to the People’s Improv Theatre in Chapel Hill, North Carolina and performed four minutes of stand-up comedy about breaking up with Jesus. The host put hand sanitizer on the microphone after every comedian’s set. Coronavirus was a word that had been floating around and we clearly did not know what it meant.

On Friday, March 6, 2020, spring break started at the University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill where I am working on my Ph.D. A week later, Wednesday, March 11, 2020, a week after I performed at an in-person open mic, UNC announced students would not be returning from spring break and that all classes would move online as of March 23.

I would not start taking anti-anxiety medication until June 17, 2020, nearly a month after the spring semester ended.

Between March 4 and June 17, I had to write three final papers and finish projects for my classes. The following essay, which originated in a feminist ethnography class that spring, is my attempt to struggle with the incessant push and pull of productivity, a force that is taxing in the best of times and nearly broke me when the COVID-19 pandemic first took hold in the United States.

I originally intended the essay to be an ethnographic study of late-night comedy as it moved online during the pandemic. However, my anxiety and depression meant that I just couldn’t care about Seth Myers or Stephen Colbert.

I tried to do an autoethnography of a person living in a pandemic and struggling to write a final paper. This effort turned out not to be autoethnography at all. Sure, I collected data on myself (looking back at some of my journal entries during that time I feel grateful that I did not attempt to harm myself), I just didn’t do anything with that data. There was no analysis. There was just me, split into three voices: Joey, a third-

person, nonbinary, and often angry narrator trying to turn a traumatic moment into plot; Joseph, a grad student trying to write a final paper and reject productivity; and the unnamed me of journal entries trying and failing to deal with what was happening.

This essay, then, is my attempt to speak what I didn't know how to speak. I wrote out of a practical need to submit a paper for a grade and a visceral need to articulate my feelings of being muted during a global health crisis. I draw from Della Pollock's understanding of performative writing and the performative "I" as an unruly and provisional embodied author. As Pollock says, "[T]o the very extent that—disorderly, aberrant, accident-prone, and uncompromising in her embrace of what might otherwise make us cringe—the reader and/or writer as female stunt pilot makes a perfect mess of conventional scholarly forms, she renews our contract with possibility" ("The Performative 'I'" 252). Pollock challenges the ways in which we write ourselves out of our own research, miming the scholarly forms we know and removing our bodies.

Following Pollock's female stunt pilot, this essay grapples with productivity, returning often to my body as it was struggling in the pages of my journal. In what follows, you'll find narrator Joey (who is using anger to mask pain and is searching for any lifeline in the cosmic tarot deck), scholar Joseph trying to understand the pandemic through theory, and the unnamed journal writer self who is hurting and continues to interrupt the flow of essaywriting.

A quick note for clarity. I mark the third-person narrator Joey by starting their sections with the phrase, "Our narrator Joey." I italicize journal entries. All other sections not marked in such ways are the voice of the scholar Joseph.

I have never lived through a pandemic before, so I don't know how to write from the midst of a global traumatic event. The only option available to me is to set out and get absolutely lost. As Judith Halberstam articulates in *The Queer Art of Failure*, "We will wander, improvise, fall short, and move in circles. We will lose our way, our cars, our agenda, and possibly our minds, but in losing we will find another way of making meaning in which...no one gets left behind" (25). My hope is that as I get lost, anyone who reads this essay will join me and we will make our way together.

Our narrator Joey looks out the window and sees a mail truck. Joey has done better on the coffee today. It is a bit stronger. Can you pull a tarot card for a cup of coffee? Mail carriers, grocery store workers, some restaurant employees, liquor store employees, medical professionals, first responders, fast food workers, utility workers—all are deemed essential

and continue going to work, putting themselves at risk. While Joey types, a human person runs a machine that manufactures toilet paper. Another human person monitors the packaging of that toilet paper. A human person good with logistics makes sure the toilet paper is directed to the right location. Many human persons deal with delivery and stocking and selling of the toilet paper. Joey has still not seen toilet paper on the shelves for nearly three weeks.

13 Apr 2020 – 1552 (3:52 pm) M was talking about crossing the sidewalk to avoid any semblance of contact in a pandemic. I understand. Yet, I am the one who will be leaving the house tomorrow to spend several hours looking for groceries and supplies, while my partner stays at home and works. I have the flexibility. Is this a gendered decision? If my partner were in a doctoral program, perhaps she would have the time to spare to go out and get groceries, while I worked a traditional 9-to-5 job. I can hear her in the other room, playing with our dog, possibly grooming him. I fear I am missing out.

Our narrator Joey is stuck. We see Joey sitting and we can feel the depression spreading as we look into their eyes, the eyes inherited from their mom, Rita, the hazel with some gold corona around the pupil. Joey turns to the cosmic tarot deck they got for Christmas. Joey shuffles and then places a hand on the deck, slowing breaths and holding a question in mind. “What direction should I go with my final paper?” Joey turns over the card to reveal the Eight of Wands. Joey has been drawing a lot of fire signs from the deck lately. Odd, because Joey, a Cancer born in July, is a water sign. But the cups have not been overflowing lately. The fire has been raging. The Eight of Wands. “A young man jumps up high. Meaning: swiftness, movement, activity, enthusiasm, new solutions.” New solutions. That’s what this situation calls for.

In an article from *The New Republic* titled, “Against Productivity in a Pandemic,” Nick Martin, outlines the ways in which the ethos of “America’s hustle culture” has permeated every part of society, the Protestant work ethic for the digital and quarantined body. As Martin puts it, “So life mostly sucks right now, plain and simple. And if you find yourself considering that fact, it’s just as likely that you’ll bump up against some unwelcome reminder that—in the face of historic disruption and uncertainty—you can actually get a lot done in home isolation!” Martin defines hustle culture as “the idea that every nanosecond of our lives must be commodified and pointed toward profit and self-improvement.” But why?

The notion of hustling and improving yourself while quarantined has so many layers and it is not too difficult to begin to see just how gender is enmeshed. In her insightful and cutting explanation and excoriation of unwaged housework, Silvia Federici reminds us that women are always in the domestic sphere, in the home even when they join the workforce, always doing the reproductive labor of society: “Wherever we turn we can see that the jobs women perform are mere extensions of the housewife’s condition in all its implications” (*Revolution at Point Zero* 20). How much greater is the pressure now that the doubled reproductive labor of the home site and the work site are collapsed once again (not that they ever were separate), and compounded with the burden of bettering yourself, bettering your partner, bettering your children. What is this pandemic going to reveal or unsettle about this never-ending cycle of reproductive labor?

Nick Martin continues in the article against productivity, “This is not a time to optimize or stoically pretend nothing has changed.” Martin then quotes from Jenny Odell’s *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*: “In the context of health and ecology, things that grow unchecked are often considered parasitic or cancerous. Yet we inhabit a culture that privileges novelty and growth over the cyclical and the regenerative.” I argue that the drive to pretend nothing has changed in the midst of a global pandemic is part of an impulse toward productivity that disregards needs and nurturing for a view toward maximizing profits.

The pursuit of maximizing profits is one that resides in the university as well. Does the university pretend to be anything different than an institution prepping workers for lifelong productivity? As a grad student, I occupy the in-between space of worker as a graduate teaching assistant and teaching fellow, and non-worker as a student taking classes. That in-between space is still one of productivity. Write papers. Grade speeches. Teach classes. Read essays. For while as much as I want to believe in the classroom as a space for freedom and liberation, that is not how it operates. As Cary Nelson states in the foreword to Marc Bousquet’s *How the University Works*, “Higher education as a whole continues to drift fitfully toward a narrow mission of job training...We are the people who staff and maintain the system that exists. It operates not merely with our consent but with our sustaining labor” (xv-xvii). If higher education is a job, then many times the instructor or teacher plays the role of the manager or employer, the role of power. As Kathi Weeks says in *The Problem with Work*, “This relation of command and obedience, the right of the employer to direct his or her employees that is granted by the contract, is not so much a byproduct of exploitation as its very precondition” (21). Instructors and teachers require students to produce

something in order to get a grade. If a student does not produce, they will fail and may never move up the ladder of academic labor. Students must progress. Students must produce.

20 April 2020 - 0926 I am nearing the end of the semester and feeling absolutely lost. I have been trying to turn the events of living in a pandemic into scholarly works, but I find I am failing. Today, I go to the tarot deck because I am uncertain. I am uncertain of my path forward, even though I know what I want to do and what I need to do. I need to write about what it means to live right now during this pandemic in this body in this geographic location. I draw the Princess of Wands and know without even looking at the meaning that this is the right card for me. A tempestuous young woman wearing a golden tiara. Meaning: spontaneous, energetic, willing to accept risks, impulsive. I am taking a risk because this is not a typical end-of-semester paper by any means. But it cannot be because this is not a typical end of semester.

Yesterday, my partner and I drove to a friend's house to deliver baby clothes in anticipation of the birth of their human child. We sprayed Lysol all over the bag and the clothes. We drove out of our apartment complex, able to turn left because of the lack of traffic, which would usually be quite high and constant. We arrived at the house of our friends.

We leave the bag of clothes on the front step, knock on the door, and then retreat to the yard. We chat for over an hour wearing masks (our friends are not) and standing over six feet away from each other. I am meeting one of the people for the first time and I have to stop myself from walking up for a handshake (like is expected of male bodies) or a hug (what is possible for human bodies).

Come on comedian. Snap out of it. How can you make this funny? What are other comedians doing? That reminds me of a joke I just made up. How is a culture that relies on productivity no matter the circumstance like a cookie with lots of butter? They both crumble.

Our narrator Joey removes the cosmic tarot deck from their bookshelf. Joey shuffles and shuffles and cuts the deck. They place their hand on the deck and ask, in their head, *What should I focus on today?* They draw the Ace of Pentacles inverted or reversed. Pentacles. The earth sign. Grounded. Joey thinks they know what the card means but decides to look it up on the internet just in case. Joey looks at a website called Tarot.com, where they receive the following information:

An Ace represents the first step to a goal, and if that step is

repeated, it will cover great distances...The Ace of Coins reversed suggests that you should reconnect with the values you are trying to serve. Perhaps external appearances have to distinguish between true gold and costume jewelry. Search your heart. If your motives aren't clear, your performance won't shine either.

What could this mean? Joey searches their heart for their motives. Joey thinks about the implicit warnings of Deborah Gordon against experimentation for experimentation's sake, especially as Gordon notes, in U.S. scholarship: "[Experimentalism] bears all the love of iconoclasm so near and dear to the Anglo, Protestant, entrepreneurial, dominant culture. Fascination with the new, desire to be associated with innovation or to be on the cutting edge, is the frontier philosophy" ("Culture Writing Women" 431-432). Is that what Joey is doing? Writing just to write? Experimenting just to experiment, to be viewed as on the cutting edge? What are the structures of privilege that allow Joey the freedom to experiment? Does acknowledging those structures of privilege mean that Joey should not experiment, that they should force themselves to fit into the traditional academic style, the style that is immediately legible to academic audiences, but illegible to Joey's own heart? What is the costume jewelry? The academic or the nonacademic? And why is there a binary? What is the point?

13 Apr 2020 – 1552 (3:52 pm; continued) I find myself questioning the point of it all. Earlier today, my colleagues E and M wondered about the point of academic research in the constraints of fellowship funding and in the time of a pandemic. So what is the point? What is the inverted (or reversed) Ace of Pentacles trying to tell me? I am wondering about these matters sitting at my computer for about the sixth hour in a row. I am on my third video call and I have three more hours after this. But I'm trying to write papers. Because as much as I believe productivity is a white, masculine, ableist wretched ethos, I do not have the fortitude within to just give it up, to hibernate, to let myself crash. Someone has to keep this plane going.

I argue that the need to keep the plane going, to produce no matter what and make lemonade out of lemons has unrecognized roots in the traces of nineteenth century White supremacist evolutionary theory. To summarize one of Kyla Schuller's arguments in *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century*, the only body that can come from hardship is the body that can take in hardship and really make something of itself that can be impressed and grow. That body is always

already overdetermined as the White abled male body. As Schuller says, “[C]alibrations of an organism's degree of receptivity to its surroundings are key to the consolidation and operation of biopower and its materializations of racial and sexual difference over the course of the nineteenth century” (207). The capitalist body. The bourgeois body. The bootstrap body. The body that “privileges novelty and growth” above the “regenerative.” The Silicon Valley venture capitalist body. The body that wants to move fast and break stuff. This is the body that can thrive in a pandemic. This is the body that can make the most of being in quarantine, start a new hobby, make sourdough bread, write that novel, finish a final paper for a class while making a salient point.

Disability studies scholars developed the concept of “crip time” as a space and time of possibility. Ellen Samuels also articulates the ways that crip time is one of loss and rupture. As Samuels says, “For *crip time* is *broken time*. It requires us to break in our bodies and minds to new rhythms, new patterns of thinking and feeling and moving through the world. It forces us to take breaks, even when we don't want to, even when we want to keep going, to move ahead. It insists that we listen to our bodyminds so closely, so attentively, in a culture that tells us to divide the two and push the body away from us while also pushing it beyond its limits. Crip time means listening to the broken languages of our bodies, translating them, honoring their words” (“Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time”). I believe that a society that relies on productivity even in the midst of a pandemic (a pandemic that is literally disabling) is a society that privileges certain bodies over others. Productivity assumes a body that is able to write on a fixed deadline of timetables and semester calendars and work weeks.

This human body, this one right here, the scholar typing these words that will have already been typed by the time anyone reads them or hears them or never sees them, this human body is breaking down and exhausted and crying. This body is worried about the body of its mother and the body of its brother and bodies of the people just outside the window and those further away. The bodies that are being harmed and neglected in part by the endless push toward productivity, the forward thrust of history toward some myth of progress that can never look back because to reflect is to ponder and to question and to just rest for one damn moment.

21 April 2020 – 1321 (1.21 pm) – I just sit for a minute. I stop producing and I realize my body has been trying to get my attention. I can feel it, just behind the place where I make my facial expressions, where I convince everyone that I'm fine. So I sit with the feeling, with the

moment and ask my body what it needs. And I find I am being productive again. I am producing tears. I am crying onto my keyboard, onto my white desk from Ikea, onto my clumsy fingers. I am crying and I am sad and I cannot see tomorrow. Time is productive. Time is capital. Time is money. But this is a queer time indeed. I cannot take in information, so how the hell am I supposed to put out information? As a person in academia, I live in a world of ideas. My friend Yana says that is a nice place to be right now. But ideas are failing me. Words are failing me. Even my body is failing me, but my body is trying to tell me what I really need and who I really am. And now I'm thinking about Haruki Murakami again as I sit down to write this paper. I'm thinking back to what I imagine will be the epigraph of this project. As Murakami says, "I sat back down on the sofa, ready to draw a portrait of the man with no face. But I had no idea where to begin, or how to get started. There was only a void, and how are you supposed to give form to something that does not exist?"

Our narrator Joey has finished the French press of warm, dark coffee and looks out at the rain streaming from green leaves. Joey tries to remember that they are a performer. Performance is how they know the world. And writing, even writing a scholarly paper is a performance. And now Joey remembers Jafari Allen's account of life in Cuba for Black Cubans before, during and after the 1959 Revolution. In *iVenceremos? The Erotics of Black Self-Making in Cuba*, Allen blends on-the-ground accounts of lives lived in complex messiness with a theoretical and historical situating of gender, sexuality, race, and class as they exist in a complicated global-colonial and Cuban context. Allen's aim is to counter, "Approaching problems of society as 'either/or' while people continue to live their lives as 'and/both/but'" (130). Concluding the work, Allen says, "Living is messy business and we should not attempt to sanitize or depoliticize it with these "just so" stories, for the sake of elegance...I hope that in my work I have shown that inhering in these small, intimate, troubled spaces is a powerful and virtually unexplored ground for political possibilities" (187). Joey wonders if they have managed to avoid sanitizing the process of productivity in a pandemic.

This is not Cuba. This is very much a white scholar writing a paper. But the messiness is the point. Life is lived in the messy. The mess is where we grow and learn and fail and love. When life gives us lemons, we should not always be forced to make lemonade. Maybe we can just sit with lemons. Maybe we can use the zest, or put them down the garbage disposal, or cut them and smell them and feel our mouths pucker. Or

maybe we could just hold them and think about how things grow.

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