

Inside and Outside, At Home, Spring 2020 Semester, Brooklyn

Beth Evans
Associate Professor, Library
Brooklyn College
City University of New York



To all readers who long for the simpler days of [Spy vs Spy](#)

Table of Contents

[The Setting and the Characters](#)

[The Wired Infrastructure](#)

[Outdoors](#)

[Leavings and Losses](#)

[The Costs of COVID](#)

[Returning](#)

[Battleground](#)

The Setting and the Characters

I am surrounded by Brooklyn College students as the group of us has decided to go into an off-season hibernation together. The plan is to keep our germ pool static and share it stingily only among our small clan. We will make as few trips as possible out of our cave. We will hunt for food at odd hours, going one at a time and still carrying our reusable shopping bags.

The painful intensity of the pandemic has made the [recent restriction on plastic bags](#) seem like a long-ago, innocuous change in our routines. At the time [consumers, politicians and store keepers](#) fretted and protested. Foolish us. None of us was prescient enough to know that in less than a month the customers would be fleeing from the stores, seeking out [scarce delivery slots](#) offered by online grocery retailer and living with the ethical dilemma of swapping out their own health risks for the health risks of poorly paid delivery people. Who had time to worry about plastic bags now? The delay on the enforcement of the ban until mid-October, as it turns out, was actually the result of a [lawsuit](#) brought by the plastics industry and not a result of the distraction of the pandemic. Nonetheless, [small bodega](#) owners who had wondered how to operate if they were forbidden to pack up customer orders in plastic bags, would instead, through the spring and summer, struggle to stay open to provide groceries for underserved communities and jobs for low-wage workers. In time, and because of the events of the pandemic months, I would come to know one of these [bodega workers](#), a son of Yemini immigrants, studying at Brooklyn College.

[Larger grocery stores](#) would work out the logistics to stay open and line up the shoppers six feet apart before allowing them into the store one at one time. Those in elected office and restaurant owners would experiment with turning Michelin-grade restaurants into take-out joints providing cocktails on the go, but eventually these restaurants would [all close down](#). It became clear that it was tougher to turn a silk purse into a sow's ear than anyone could had ever imagined.

Plastic bags were disappearing from view, no longer dressing bare tree branches like the weird sisters in an amateur production of Macbeth. This change in the topography was not as a result of the new regulation, but rather because [bare supermarket shelves](#) announced to consumers that there was no food to be had. And yet still, we were all being told that gallons of milk were being spilled and leafy greens plowed under for lack of the [proper channels to route this food](#) to individual people and small scale consumers. By mid-April, nonetheless, high-end

restaurant purveyors would be [marketing directly to consumers](#), so long as these shoppers were in the position to buy [35 pounds of spaghetti squash](#) and \$259 [seafood lovers boxes of fish](#). By early May, [factory farm animals were being euthanized](#). Outbreaks of the pandemic among the assembly line workers at cavernous, cold [meat packing plants](#) led to closures in these vital links in the food supply chain. Earlier in the pandemic, President Trump had signed an [executive order](#) giving meat meatpacking plants essential status, requiring them to stay open and protecting them from lawsuits as long as they followed the federal guidelines. Farmers could not afford to continue to feed animals that were never going to make it to the American table. Conversely, small farms that worked the farmers market circuit, were [selling out quickly](#) with their savvy, time-tested, direct to consumer approach.



(Click embedded video or visit on [Youtube](#))

Free food distribution becomes a more common sight during the pandemic

There were other holes in the supply chain, some small and round and sized to fit the humblest atoms of our economy. Later in the spring we would learn of an [impending coin shortage](#) connected to the pandemic. The NPR host of Weekend Edition Saturday, Scott Simon, would introduce this bit of news on a segment of the show. He managed to work the [obligatory mention](#) of the name of the composer of the show's theme music into the transition. His comment, "BJ Leiderman still writes our theme music, but pocket change is the new toilet paper," reminded us that the coronavirus would no longer let us take anything for granted. Perhaps it was time again to pick up pennies on the sidewalk. This, of course, was coming on the heels of an artificially created toilet paper shortage catastrophized in the [popular press](#) and scrutinized in [scientific literature](#).

Where my brood hibernates and slowly digest our berries scowered earlier in the spring, so much time together has resulted unexpectedly in less time eating together. In the fall, after seven months of pandemic, *The New York Times* would see family togetherness quite differently. The grey lady (which was just declared

this year as being [not-so-grey](#)) would celebrate [CEOs gathered for family dinners](#), not four, not five, not six, but seven days of the week! I am sure the unraveling of family togetherness at my house was due to the erasing of the clear time demarcations that [having to get up and go somewhere](#) used to carve in our day. My younger, high school aged son's alarm rings at two in the afternoon and I wonder what appointment compels him to bother to set it. By the time I leave work and walk next door to the kitchen to start with dinner, both of my sons have mortared thick slices of sprouted wheat bread with knife fulls of creamy peanut butter and disappeared down to their rooms. My older son's girlfriend will take nibbles of his sandwich between film editing sessions on iMovie, my partner will lament that his Crohn's disease leaves him with no appetite, and another young adult living in the house will pop a packaged vegan entrée into the microwave. She will take her food from the kitchen to eat in the solitude of her rented room.

Procurement, rather than mealtime, it seems, has become the more likely occasion for family celebration. I gloated with success after the calculated three hours spent watching a free recording of a live show from the [National Theatre](#) of Great Britain, allowed me early on a Sunday to secure the single remaining delivery spot on the one newly available day listed on the Peapod website. I checked out my groceries for a delivery date two weeks into the future. Would I starve for what I was lacking in the meantime, or take my chances and shop at a local store?

The Brooklyn College student boarding in the house appreciates living walking distance to the College, but as of mid-April she hasn't walked there in over a month. Nor has my son, another Brooklyn College student, biked there, and neither has his girlfriend, yet another student who attends the College, taken the ten minute ride on the B 44 Select bus. I miss my rides home with a colleague from campus who usually drives in and lives nearby.

My friend and colleague lives quite close to a neighborhood landmark, an historic [Dutch farmhouse](#). This anachronistically situated, early eighteenth century structure, has been the site of a [Brooklyn College archeological dig](#). Those who live nearby, however, always concentrating on contemporary concerns like little league practice in the park and bingo night at the local [St. Colomba hall](#), have become indifferent to the old homestead at odds with the otherwise uniform patchwork of the neighborhood. These neighbors will plant tomatoes in their backyard but also tulips in the front, a nod to the Dutch persistence. In a future in which food procurement promises to be problematic, the tomatoes may serve the better purpose. For now, though, the tulips die early in the spring, their [edible petals](#) mostly dropping, uneaten, on the ground.

I have walked my dog by the farmhouse a number of times on the way to the vet. In April, when I must go to the vet to pick up the her flea medicine, for flea season is about the begin and only the dog dashes outside without giving it a second thought, I call ahead, and when I arrive a masked technician reaches her arm out through the narrow opening of the glass door to hand me the \$70 pill my white freckled pit bull will spit out despite the peanut butter coating.

Back at home, my high school senior son has to decide within the next two weeks what college he will attend in the fall, and, simultaneously reckon with the possibility that going away to college may mean paying an exorbitant tuition for the privilege of working side-by-side with his CUNY senior brother on separate laptops in the basement of our Brooklyn house. Nobody is sure what will happen in September, but I have [read](#) that delaying the start of the fall semester by as much as four months is a real possibility at one institution.

Living in this particular petri dish is my ailing partner and my concerns that no turn in his deteriorating health should land him in an emergency room. It is commonly understood that those places, hospitals, any health care facility, are now likely to be the [deadliest of environments](#) for anyone, especially the sick, and should be avoided like the far ends of subway platforms in the small hours of the morning. That was, of course, before the New York City [subways were closed down](#) in May from one to five am, for the first time in the history of the system, for deep cleaning to remove the virus.

One dog, two cats (one old, cranky and a homebody, the other young and adventurous with multiple homes in the neighborhood), a silky smooth white rabbit with eyes like big black olives and seven, no, six chickens (a Brooklyn-based raccoon got to one of the speckled Plymouth Rock hens a week ago) remind us all every day that when we normally leave the house to go where we work or learn, we go to places remarkably free from fur, feathers and fights over who gets to sleep bathed by the sun streaming onto a patch on the floor.

We all, all 15 visible, living creatures and however many invisible living and non-living creatures and creatures in the [gray zone](#), reside here together. We share the sunrise together each day, do our work on our separate computers, explore the internet for forms of virtual entertainment since doing school work and work work on the computer is just not enough screen time, wonder if there will be a [baseball season](#) with no one in the stands to cheer, peak into the refrigerator and wonder if eating now will mean a longer wait for the next order of food to arrive, and lower

ourselves into bed at the end of the day, like the sun itself, with an inevitability, with a feeling that we are the charms on the endless loop of a chain, with no possibility of veering from our fixed rotation.

In the morning we will hear sirens, day after day for weeks. The house where we hibernate is within a quarter of a mile in two directions of two small hospitals. We will hear the sound of the sirens, or not, in direct proportion to the changing statistics we hear reported for the virus in the daily news reports. By the second weekend in April, the anxious whirring sound and the uneasiness it stirs in each one of us will begin to interrupt our thoughts, our work, our conversations, less and less. The release of tension will be palpable.

The Wired Infrastructure

Our second printer, the black and white laser jet printer my partner's former employer was about to send to the landfill, was a real workhorse. Regrettably, it stopped talking to the computer I use at home about two weeks before the coronavirus pandemic began. This printer was much better than the ink jet printer we also had because it could print what seemed like forever before the toner light came on. The boutique inkjet printer with its many functionalities guzzled down tiny ink pods like King Kong drinking banana vodka shots from a baby bottle.

The inkjet printer does (did) color printing, but it had stopped communicating with the computer long before this crisis. For a while now we could no longer do color prints with the color printer directly from the computer. We are not miserable about the loss. Color prints are way too expensive anyway. Additionally, the photocopy function in this printer no longer worked, and the fax no longer worked either. But we knew we could live without the latter, for who does faxes anymore anyway? The scans from this printer couldn't go directly to the computer, but we could do scans to a flash drive plugged into a port in the printer and then shift the flash drive to the computer and print the scan from the flash drive out through the laser printer. This technique became our alternative to straight out photocopying. It was a cumbersome system for printing, but it worked, except now the laser jet printer also no longer would talk to the computer. The result is that we could not print at all.

Not having a printer shouldn't really matter, one would think, with everything online during these times of distance learning. Nevertheless, my anxious teenage

son was so horrified that we now had no printer that he lashed out at me as an incompetent household/office manager and insisted that we buy a printer. Of course, so many stores were closed and I was sure electronics stores are not considered essential businesses. [GameStop](#), though, seemed to think otherwise. The alternative to visiting a store, though, was not much more helpful now with online order delivery dates predicted to be a month away. We all knew what was causing the delays. The toilet paper orders of desperate hoarders totally clogged up the plumbing, that is, the infrastructure of our national delivery systems.

What could this high schooler possibly need to print anyway? Did he need to print out worksheets, fill them out, scan them and email them back to his teachers? This would astonish me since it is a known fact that many [NYC high school students have no computers at home](#) and are way less likely, then, to have printers. Or scanners. Who knows? Maybe it was just another excuse for my teen to fight with his beleaguered mother.

Hey silly boomer, a voice is heard to say. What are you saying there? People don't need scanners. They take pictures with their phones, instead. Oh. Okay. I am schooled.

The keyboard I was using with my computer was a castaway. It began to show its age with missing and stuck keys, like an old man losing a tooth or two and struggling to get up because of arthritis in his knees. My son had gotten me for Christmas a wireless, solar powered keyboard as a replacement. In an earlier life, I would have kept an old broken keyboard around in case I ever needed it again, but thanks to [Marie Kondo](#) I, and everybody, had been learning that we needed to throw things away. These times led [some](#) to plunge into the minimalist method with a vengeance. Others confessed their [regret](#) for discarding useful things no longer available in this time of making due. Contrary to my character, I abided by Konmari's advice. I tossed the old keyboard into a bucket on the back porch and waited for an e-waste recycling day to show up on the calendar. Fortunately, that day had not yet arrived when the virus hit, so I was able to yank the old keyboard out of the bin by its tail-like cord and reckoned that despite its missing keys and keys that got stuck it would get me through these days of working from home.

At the time the keyboard at home was failing me, the mouse attached to my work computer began to act up. The scroll button stubbornly stuck, like a leashed dog refusing to return home. Gliding quickly down a screen to find the one needed sentence became impossible. As though knowing that my home work site should not be any more trouble-free than my office work site, the newer, solar powered

keyboard suddenly opted to give multiple functions, all executed at once, to a single stroke of a key. The backspace key, for instance, began to type a double "Z" and a number nine every time you hit it. Perhaps the new solar powered keyboard just ran out of sun. Like some of the days we had in February. February, when the coronavirus really was a "Chinese virus." Which it never was, of course, anyway. And so, I am using the older keyboard once again.

My computer speakers, too, failed me during this difficult time. Increasing the volume only served to increase the white noise of static and occasional screeching of inexplicable feedback. I had been trying to make a [video](#) to provide online, asynchronous instruction for students who used our library, and it was a little tricky when the sound cuts out as you are trying to edit a video. Additionally, I made the video using software I found online that was reported to be a free alternative to a pricey product. As it turns out the webcasting software is not free after a limited amount of use. I turned to a colleague, who for good reason, had paid good money to have that product on his home computer. He agreed to help me do the video editing. At the office, the expensive software would be free to use because the College owns site licenses. My house is very close to Brooklyn College but not on site. My colleague noted apologetically in my anxious phone call to him that the electricity periodically was going out in certain parts of his apartment (pandemic related? I think not) and he had to keep getting up and moving his network router in order to do his own work. Each time he moved, he was followed by a trail of his six rescued cats, ears pointed forward (one [clipped](#) on each), certain they were about to get a fresh dish of food with his every excursion through the apartment. This same good soul had been leading a caravan of two, himself and his wife, each day on grocery runs. They sling saddle bags over the backs of their bicycles and offered to do pick-ups for the elderly, like me, from COSTCO. I cherished him for his heart, but excused him from the five mile detour to my house that his generosity would require.

My crackling computer speakers should have been accompanied by a web cam. The webcam would offer intimacy and a human face to every Blackboard Collaborate/Zoom Meeting/Google Hangout that packed my day during the pandemic. How grateful I would be each time the moderator courteously instructs us to turn off our videos in order to save on bandwidth. Please, let's spare the group these greying hairs and tired, craw-toed eyes. Instead I provided my own cloak of anonymity in lacking a camera.

I think the home computer itself is the heart of a lot of my problems. Before beginning working from home, I decided to investigate why a message box was

telling me my anti-virus software would not install properly. After two hours in chat tech services with two different technicians taking over my computer, the anti-virus software installed and I was ready to take on an evil universe of hackers and identity thieves. Not to worry that the second anti-virus software technician's final chat message to me was that my hard drive was very unstable. I was sure my computer could get me through this brief period of telecommuting. The computer, though, was six years old, quite an old age in computer years, especially if you went by the new [calculator](#) for aging. What does it matter that this is a calculator for dog years? Measures were being [recalculated](#) daily during these confusing pandemic days.

The [CUNY Distant Learning Archive writing prompt](#) encourages students to consider, “do you have sufficient access to technology, software, devices to complete the rest of your semester?” and faculty to think about “how have you made accommodations for students different degrees of technological access to avoid exacerbating these inequities? How will this experiment impact the accessibility needs of students with disabilities?” The demographic differentiation of the prompts suggests that faculty are well situated with appropriate and up-to-date hardware and at the very worst need gentle reminders that their teaching should be mindful of their less well situated students.

As a reference librarian at CUNY, I have been grateful for the sake of my colleagues and our students that we already have had in place for over a decade a cooperative chat reference service. Chat reference is staffed round the clock, every day of the week, by librarians from universities and public libraries internationally. During this time of online learning, the chat reference desk became the only reference desk available to our library users. A corporate buy-out meant that in the midst of the pandemic librarians at many CUNY campuses offering chat reference needed to retrain on a new system. The transition had gone reasonably well, but as with all things technological, there were some challenges. A colleague at another CUNY college got logged off from chat when helping a patron because of the limitations of the librarian’s home internet connection. I picked up the student’s question when she came back on again, but the student asked if I could reconnect her with the first librarian who had helped her. As I learned later through a quick email exchange, my librarian colleague at the other CUNY college is still using a DSL connection because she cannot get FIOS in her neighborhood. She eventually figured out that she could switch to cell data and to use her own mobile phone as a hot spot when helping students on chat reference. It was not an [economical choice](#), but it was the only one she felt she could make.

I can, fortunately, and have, without too much financial burden, upgraded my computer speakers and added an alright-ish \$20 web cam to my computer monitor. I can now say with confidence that the image you will see of me in Zoom sessions is distorted by poor camera resolution and not a reflection of my aging face. But nobody appears to be dressed up for these events. How many of my colleagues have confessed to others present at a meeting their own lack of showering and hair combing before one of too many online meetings?

We all laugh together at the [joke](#) circulating about the best time of day to exchange one's daytime pajamas for one's nighttime pajamas and wonder if it is really true that men are seated at their computers [not wearing pants](#). (A professor integrated a [pants requirement](#) into his fall syllabus). The laughs continue around the viral image of one boss featured as a [potato](#) on a Monday morning Zoom meeting and the pun-filled thread that sprouted afterwards. [Zoom-bombing](#) reaches the heights of hilarity when, into the [Hollywood Square/Brady Bunch grid](#) in early July, a [Rick-Roll hack](#) dances, hips gyrating, ginger-haired head jerking from side to side, Yamaha synthesizer keeping a steady beat and an employee who toddled off to nursery school the year her later constant companion, the iPhone was first released, asks "Who's Rick?"

My web cam picks up the wall behind me. You will not see an impressive library of hard-covers books, accumulated over decades of an academic life. I am a librarian, after all, and rely on libraries for most of my books. Nor will you see an anonymous white wall with possibly one framed print. My background does not include multiple large windows looking out on trees budding early in back of my Adirondacks weekend home. I have also not chosen to protect my privacy with a simulation of a Caribbean island serving as a green screen. I, instead, have an [eight foot by 12 foot map of the world](#).



The author at home on Zoom

The camera on my monitor faces out towards the Atlantic Ocean, bordered on the left by the coast of the northern half of South American and the southern half of North American. To the right of the Atlantic Ocean, as expected, is the snout of north-western Africa, Spain balancing midway across its muzzle. A large stuffed salmon swims up through the North Atlantic towards the Norwegian Sea. My partner brought the pillow fish home from a yard sale and this open spot of blue water coloring my dining room wall seemed the best place for it. The salmon swims upstream in perpetuity. Just as I set off on my never ending treadmill in search of groceries.

The experience of seeing myself against this map backdrop when I find myself, yet again for the third or fourth time in one day in a Zoom meeting or classroom, reminds me that I am at home, working at home, and not in my office at the Brooklyn College Library where several years ago I had dragged a diminutive pink settee into my eight foot by five foot cubicle, along with a Japanese screen, meant to make the office appear more homey.



The author's office at Brooklyn College

Outdoors

The chickens are laying more eggs now, now that the days are longer. My son walks out the kitchen door past the dead stalks of last summer's weeds to the life in the chicken coop he has built and will renovate as we proceed into a summer at home. He fills up cardboard egg cartons liberally and I listen to the news about the rising price of eggs. And of poultry.

My son's plans, dating back to that day that the first order of four speckled chicks [arrived in the mail](#), was either to become a vegetarian when the well ran dry and his pensionless employees could give him no more of their hard labor, or to slaughter one of the hens and prepare our Sunday dinner. Six new baby chicks arrived recently and our flock grows to a perfect butcher's dozen.

This same young student races up with his laptop from Zoom school in his bedroom to show the students and professor in his urban sustainability theory course the day-old foundlings. A week or so later he does a [webinar](#) hosted by the [Brooklyn College Sustainability Club](#) about raising chickens and achieving food security. [Carrie Sadovnik](#), the Brooklyn College Coronavirus Chief, Director of Environmental Health and Safety, and Chair of the Brooklyn College Sustainability Council attends, red bandana, that no doubt doubles as her street mask, loosely tied around her neck and in an off-season Christmasy contrast to her forest green pull-over. Carrie asks my son about his sources of information on raising chickens and he smugly schools the boomers in the audience that there is

this thing called the internet where he can find pretty much everything. He doesn't need books and there really isn't much of a learning curve to raising chickens. I cringe listening as a mother and a librarian. Carrie diplomatically suggests that he and others seek out elders in their families and others in the community who may have lived in farming communities to hear of their experiences with poultry. I make a mental note to check and see if the [Brooklyn College Listening Project](#) has an oral history capturing such memories. If not, I bet my son can use this thing called the internet and find a [few](#).



The author's son and his girlfriend show their class on Zoom the baby chicks

My son's webinar moves on to the topic of the [Corbin Hill Food Project](#) farm share program. Brooklyn College has served as a pick up [location](#) for the farm share but is not an active site during the pandemic. We are glad to know that the [food pantry](#) remains open for students in need like on so many [other college campuses](#). Libraries, of course, are closed, books being easy conveyers of the virus as they pass from hand to hand. Nonetheless, the quirky "[Little Free Libraries](#)," scattered across the globe with the best of intentions like rock salt sprinkled sparingly on an

icy sidewalk, have been shut down like their big siblings, large and small municipal library systems. Some little free libraries, rather than being shut down, have been cleverly repurposed in some areas into [miniature food pantries](#).



Clockwise, from top left: A Little Free Library offering free books prior to the world health crisis; a Little Free Library closed down during the pandemic; a Little Free Library repurposed as a food pantry during the economic downturn brought on by the pandemic

Those of us from the College who participated in the farm share are missing the weekly bounty of fresh vegetables with its occasional, curious surprises. Uniformly striped delicata squash and watermelon radishes colored inside like magenta sea urchins would send us in pursuit of picture dictionaries and recipes.



Farm Share at Brooklyn College off-line during the pandemic

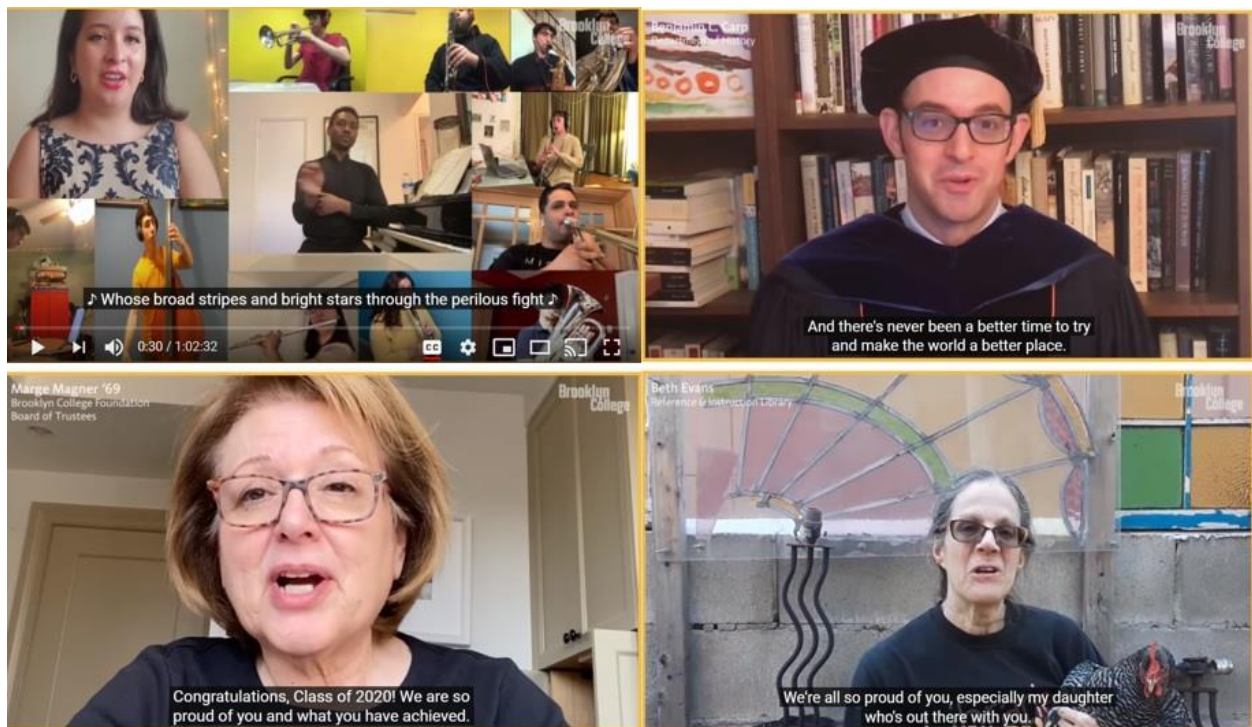
At home my sons and I continue to eat meat, I wrestle with my hypocrisy, and I dread the thought of killing the members of the flock we have all seen grow, nest, lay, and molt. The girls are nameless for we all know that giving these chickens names will cast us into our own feathered telling of Charlotte's Web. Names are words and words like "radiant" and "humble" will clarify the angelic divinity of the birds and force those others of us who strut around likewise on two legs, but with feet more modesty ensconced in shoes, to admit that we are no more superior and therefore no more worthy of slaughtering and eating the other than they are of slaughtering and eating us.

The egg cartons are piling up on the kitchen counter. The precious food inside does not need to be refrigerated, for the eggs leave the chicken's body encased in an invisible, protective membrane. Eggs produced on factory farms are washed before packaging to ensure food safety. Mass produced eggs require immediate refrigeration. Our Brooklyn eggs are randomly spotted with bits of blood and feces and stick to the cardboard sides of the cartons. A feather or two drift up in the slightest of breezes we stir when we open the carton preparing to make a meal. Yesterday, the urban farmer gave a carton of his eggs to a friend who has been raising vegetables from seeds under a grow light in her basement. She gave him a palate of her vegetables in exchange for the eggs and the barter, a part of our new economy, is complete.

My other son, the one without dirt under his fingernails, who exercises with devotion, is missing his trips to the gym, but continues to eat a protein-based diet. He cracks five eggs into the non-stick pan each day and feeds his brain in preparation for the upcoming AP exams. These exams, of course, for the first time ever, will be conducted online. Back in the days when my son used to leave for school, he woke at 6:45 am and left the house by 6:55 intending to buy an egg on a

muffin at the cart outside his school. The older son continues to mix up omelets in a small, cast iron pan, adding green, red and orange vegetables, cheese and processed meat.

I leave the kitchen to make a video for the Brooklyn College virtual graduation ceremony. I am startled later to find myself featured early in the video, at about one and three quarters of a minute into the celebration. I follow an impressive compilation of students playing the national anthem, each on an instrument at home and in perfect time with a soloist, a colleague from the history department in full academic regalia and our much beloved alumna for whom our career center is named. And there I am, standing earnestly in our trailer park of a back yard, decorated with curbside findings atop the neighbor's cinderblock wall, holding a Plymouth Rock, white and black striated chicken. The chicken looks around in confusion, as disoriented as the original North American pilgrims must have been when they struggled off those old wooden boats to the shore of their new, stolen home.



Brooklyn College Celebrates its Class of 2020 with a Video Compilation

Back on the farm, our doorbell rings and a neighbor stands a safe distance away with a large brown paper bag marked with an Uber Eats sticker. She places the bag on my stoop, explaining that it was an incorrect delivery. The driver left it outside

her kosher kitchen and turned to go, as is the practice now, before the woman could check the order. My sons are delighted to find the hot wings with sour cream sauce and skewed shrimp that will round out their dinner nicely. The older son laughs as he tells me stories of [Uber drivers eating orders](#) that never make it to their destinations. The good reviews these drivers get outweigh the occasional bad reviews they get from disappointed customers. He is convinced that the fault lies not with the integrity of the drivers but with the failure of the corporation to screen drivers for good moral character.

We ponder the ethics of all of our choices in the gig economy and wonder if the Chinese take-out around the corner will open again soon. Chinese food restaurants have been particularly [hard hit](#) by the coronavirus pandemic for a number of reasons. My neighbor tells me the local place is open, but that you need to call ahead and then visit them for pick up around by the back door. Social distancing has given birth to a new kind of speakeasy.

Leavings and Losses

May has brought about a wave of exits. First, the student renter leaves. Her mother is upstate and alone. What is here to keep her in Brooklyn? She complains she cannot go out to see her friends, she cannot go out to classes. Her restaurant waitressing job is gone and she cannot pay her rent. She packs up everything, the little she has, leaves behind one high-striving plant beside a window, and contemplates whether the fall semester, to be her last at Brooklyn College, will be online, too.

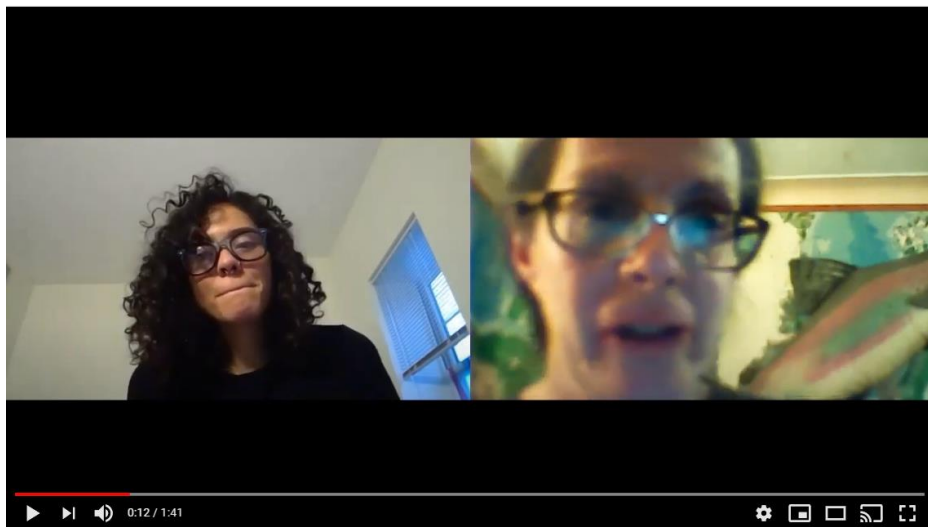
I meet up with her on a Zoom call a few weeks later and hit record. The conversation is going smoothly as we chit chat about dying hair during the pandemic now that beauty salons are closed. [Life style advisors](#) have weighed in on the topic as have [celebrities](#). We compared experiences with Black Lives Matter protests in upstate New York (which, apparently, were [quite positive](#)), the [curfew](#) in downstate New York and food shopping for vegan food once you have left New York City.

We move on to the topic of my dog. The student found the dog to be an obstacle when she lived here. She tolerated the exuberant greetings at the front door when she thought she had managed to slip in unnoticed, and she systematically pushed the dog's muzzle away from her crotch whenever she was jumped on. She listened politely as I brought her up to date on the dog's health.

The dog's veterinary needs suddenly escalated during the lockdown well beyond her low-rent flea prevention pill to the costly land of visits to specialist vets, blood

transfusions (she has had six so far), sonograms, x-rays, bone marrow aspirations and steroid medications. If the dog does not respond to the latest medication prescribed, in another week we can elect to try a combination therapy of human immune globulin and mycophenolate mofetil. The treatment will be delivered intravenously over a four hour period, and we will continue to measure her packed cell volume over time. In my mind I have made a magical thinking connection between the dog's ultimate survival and the progression of the global pandemic. But then my sister discovers in late May that her husband has terminal brain cancer. The astrocytes responsible for his Glioblastoma are estimated to have begun to entwine themselves around his grey matter in March, the same time the United States began to aggressively address the Corona virus with lockdowns. I shift my imaginary race for the cure from my dog's illness to that of my brother-in-law.

The conversation I have with the student who has moved upstate is periodically curtailed by the ill-functioning technology that has crippled me continually during these days of online living and learning. At nine and a half minutes I exit the call and come back in not once, but twice, to continue our conversation.



Student reflections on the spring 2020 semester



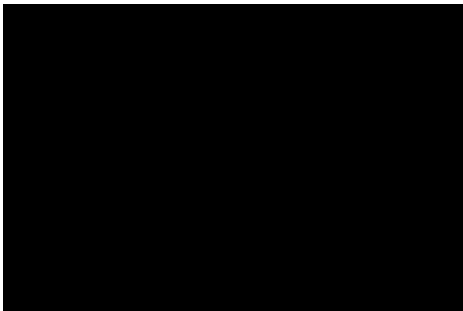
(Click embedded video or visit on [Youtube](#))

Pt. 1 Immediate Impact



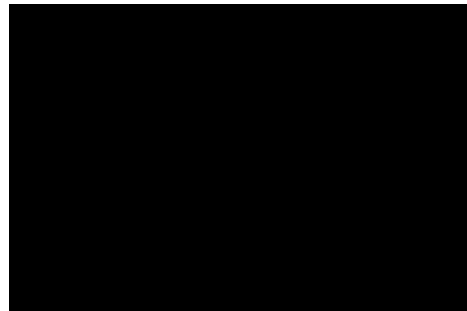
(Click embedded video or visit on [Youtube](#))

Pt. 2 Flexibility of Teachers



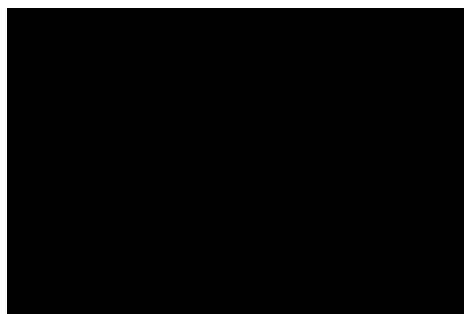
(Click embedded video or visit on [Youtube](#))

Pt. 3 Student Life Before/After Corona



(Click embedded video or visit on [Youtube](#))

Pt. 4 Urban Sustainability Major in the
Time of COVID-19



(Click embedded video or visit on [Youtube](#))

Pt. 5 Looking Forward

Several weeks later and with some time on my hands, I decide that I will solve my IT problems in Zoom as I have seen so many IT brains solve other problems back at work, and I google the issue. I hit upon a Youtube [video](#) that does the trick. I make a mental note to share it with our [Center for Teaching and Learning](#) (CTL). The CTL emerged quickly on our campus as the go-to location for help with using distance learning tools. The thought grows and I consider advising our CTL to build an FAQ of technology solutions. So many faculty, no longer having on site access to IT help, I imagine, are becoming self-taught IT saviors. Why not share the knowledge?

The student I interview says her professors have not been very accommodating to the new forms of teaching. At one point during the pandemic, a professor at another institution, Fresno City College, is called out for [shaming a student for breastfeeding](#), off-camera, during a class. A colleague in the Brooklyn College Library who is also in graduate school at Hunter College mentions that her teachers are not interested in hearing excuses about distance learning adding special challenges. They answer as do most graduate school faculty even in normal circumstances. This is graduate school. It's harder than an undergraduate program. Get over it and do the work. My colleague's professors did nothing to alter their syllabi, despite the fact that this particular program, Geoinformatics, includes numerous assignments requiring the use of specialized and expensive software that the students would expect to access through on-campus labs. Not all, though, are so unsympathetic. As one faculty member at a non-CUNY remarked in a piece in [Inside Higher Education](#), "if you're interested in getting students' best work, given what's going on in the world, you'd say, 'Let's go and revise our schedule so that you can submit your best work.'"

After the student who has rented the small bedroom in our home leaves, my son's girlfriend leaves. Her reasons are different, I am sure, and I cannot inquire. This is between her and my son. They have been close for less than a year, but managed in that small stretch of time to take two trips to Puerto Rico to work on [a tree reclamation project](#) the girlfriend is developing. The pandemic nullified my son's [Rosen Travel Fellowship](#) application through Brooklyn College and the hopes of funding a third Puerto Rico trip, but their unexpected relationship break-up would have made such a trip awkward. Perhaps we should be grateful that he has an out.

With the girlfriend's departure, I remove chocolate hazelnut butter from the ever growing, ever changing grocery list. The girlfriend lives for the hazelnut spread, on

pretzels, bananas, on a dull butter knife. At dinner she turns in aversion from leafy greens, even as she plans for the reforestation of Puerto Rico. But the girlfriend soon reappears, as suddenly as she left, and I add chocolate hazelnut butter back to the shopping list. The reunion, though, is short lived and I take the nut butter off the list for good. My son tells me that his one-time girlfriend's verve for activism has been dulled. She talks of their future conquests, dreams of the social activism post-pandemic, but he is impatient and says they must act now. Together. He can only move forward with a woman who burns with the same fire in her belly that is simmering in him, a fire with enough heat to drive him from our shared cave like a musket pellet propelled by saltpeter, sulfur and charcoal. He is a conflagration of the chemistry that sparks a revolution.

I do wonder, though, if we can blame the pandemic quarantining for the relationship break up. Depending on the source and your locations, we are told [yes](#), there is an increase in divorce and [no](#), there is not. Living for uninterrupted stretches of time closely with one another can strain a relationship. On the other hand, others sought to seize the moment of the health care crisis to cement their bonds to each other through marriage. On occasion, services were performed with a typically [idiosyncratic New York City flair](#).

Gone are the girls, my opportunities for serendipitous conversations with chatty females now that my adult daughters no longer live at home. I am mourning as our house returns to being a man cave.

These departures follow the more heartbreaking exits we learned of in late March and April. Before the spring lockdown had even ended, three faculty and two staff at [Brooklyn College](#) died of coronavirus. All were loved by someone or other though most of us knew little of who these others were who loved them. I am sure those who loved them were ordinary people for the most part. One faculty, however, [Mark Blum](#), was famous as people in our celebrity-loving culture are famous for appearing on stage and in film and television. The deceased man was more famous, perhaps, than Instagram famous [Paul "Bear" Vasquez](#). The "Double Rainbow Guy," as he was known and only known, recorded his astonishment at seeing a certain refraction of light. Bear's [video](#) has received over 48 million views in a mere five years. But despite his fame, Bear [died alone](#), seen by no one, as do all who die of this disease, in May.

I later hear Mark Blum, the Brooklyn College adjunct professor, referenced in a retelling of a story from his early career. Tim, a character who is himself an actor in Richard Nelson's ["What Do We Need to Talk About?"](#) recalls the mother of the late actor, back in the '70's commanding her husband, "if he loved his son," to round up an audience from the streets outside the tiny, West Village theater where

Blum was making his debut. *Variety* called Nelson's Zoom-staged play "the first original internet play that deftly responds to the form, this family and the times." The play was freely available on Youtube from the end of April through the end of June. A virtual hat was passed to benefit the Public Theater.

Spring, rather than summer in New York, boasted [free opera](#), [modern dance](#) and the [circus](#). The [cherry blossoms bloomed](#) as they do every year at the Botanic Gardens whether we were there to see them or not, but museums welcomed us in, virtually, for "[Cocktails with a Curator](#)." We collectively stared at our screens in awe, downing high-brow productions and stepping carefully into the don't-touch luxury of nineteenth century beaux art estates as easily as we more typically consumed Netflix productions for the everyman and woman and sank exhausted into our living room easy chair each evening. My personal guilty binge pleasure would be the 139 episode, comedy-drama, *Shameless* (not the [American version](#), the [British](#), I would need to explain each time I mentioned this) on Amazon Prime. A brief bit of dialog on the first episode of season eight would leave me wondering about my career choice at a time when people's careers were evaporating into oblivion or reconfigured in unrecognizable way. The pregnant, cigarette smoking Monica, mother of seven and Frank Gallagher's first wife, and Libby Croker, Frank's latest fiancée, compare their lives.

Monica: You got kids?

Libby: The timing was never right.

Monica: Didn't find a man until mother nature withdrew her favors?

Libby: Aw.

Monica: Career Woman?

Libby: Librarian.

Monica: Hardly worth it, was it?

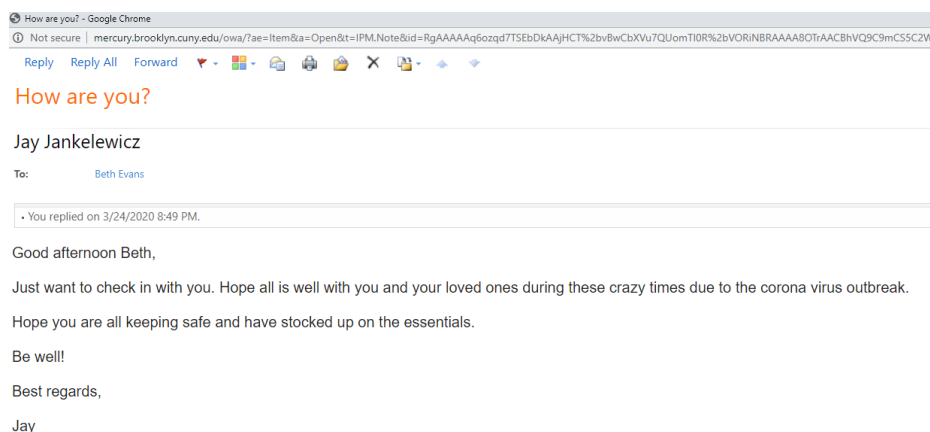
I check in on my four children to be sure they are still a part of my own new reality, and turn to students with questions on library chat to remind myself that I still have valuable work to do, even as a librarian.

We know to anticipate a number of losses of live cultural happenings as time progresses and the virus stays with us. We were sure that there would be no free [Shakespeare in the Park](#), [Philharmonic under the Stars](#), or [Blue Men](#) in the [Prospect Park bandshell](#) in the soon-to-arrive summer of social distancing. Instead, we took the free offerings off-season and online and were delighted to hear [concerts redesigned](#) to accommodate social distancing.

The human loses, of course, can not be reconfigured in a different manner or delayed until the next season or the next year. [Another](#) faculty who died at Brooklyn College was less famous than Mark Blum, but was also talented. [Paul Sheldon](#) could boast among his many accomplishments performing in the 1950's on the Ted Mack "Amateur Hour" television show. The third professor, Moshe Augenstein was not famous at all, unless 263 citations to an [article](#) on data structures in Pascal and a [3/5 grade](#) on ratemyprofessor.com bestows fame on the deceased.

I knew the two office staff who died, [one](#) briefly because of work I did on a search committee at the College, and the [other](#) because our lives intersected at many points. [Jay](#) was a man who delighted in meeting people, remembered everyone he ever met, checked in with everyone regularly and [died](#) too young at 31. He overlapped with one of my daughters during their high school years, walked into the Brooklyn College Library as an undergraduate interested in exploring the possibility of a career as a librarian, and showed up frequently in an office in Boylan Hall when I accepted a part-time position across campus as a Dean's Faculty Fellow.

Jay sent me one of his typical, thoughtful and engagingly written periodic emails near the start of the pandemic, about a week after the campus had moved to [online instruction](#) and two days after the governor called for a statewide [pause](#) in all business operations. By this point in our lives, Jay had gotten comfortable enough to call me by my first name, though I still have a cache of his emails that address me as "Professor Evans." He was concerned that I had "stocked up on the essentials" during these "crazy times," and I wrote back to him that I looked forward to seeing him "on the other end of this." No, Jay, regrettably I will not see you on the other end of this. Neither is anyone of us sure if or when we will come to an "end of this."



Email from Jay written to the author two weeks before his death

A colleague commented to me that learning more about Jay after his death has left her with the surprised feeling one would have who suddenly discovered her loving husband had, in fact, dozens of other wives. She was stunned at first, even hurt. “I thought I was his special one,” she said. She quickly came to realize, of course, that someone as thoughtful as Jay could only be the same someone who showed thoughtfulness for everyone he met. Jay seems to have had a very long list of folks with whom he took the time to check in on regularly.

The Costs of COVID

The lists of those who have passed away from COVID-19 are growing. The Professional Staff Congress, the faculty and professional staff union of the City University of New York, maintains a [longer list](#) of those who died in the University than does the Brooklyn College memorial page that includes my five Brooklyn College colleagues. Corey Robin, Brooklyn College professor of political sciences, extends the list in a May 7, 2020 [article](#) in the New Yorker. Other unions step up to memorialize the dead in [New York](#) and [around the country](#). The publication website [Inside Higher Education](#) notes on June 23, 2020, three months and three days from the date Governor Andrew Cuomo declared New York to be on pause, that “CUNY now has the sad distinction of having more coronavirus-related deaths than any other higher education system in the country.”

Gofundme campaigns spring up, [some](#) competing with [each other](#) in asking for burial support of a single family. A union email asks for support for another colleague who has been widowed with three small children after her husband’s death in a tragic accident during these overwhelmingly tragic times. I look for the name of the deceased online and draw back, stunned. The man died when he crashed a stolen motorcycle in a police chase. I re-calculate my donation but decide I must not punish the children for the sins of their father. This is a week after sending a check to another colleague whose family was burned out of their apartment in the middle of this same mess, and two weeks after tipping an essential worker \$30 for delivering my grocery order.

I am working so I cannot complain. My pay checks continue to come in and I work, as much or more than I ever worked when I went into my job at the library. Cash is flowing in our house. My son gets an economic stimulus check signed by the President of the United States. The slideshow in textbox below explains the stimulus program, in greater detail.

The Tale of a Rich World Leader Who Sent Personally Signed Checks to Many of His Poor and Struggling People

As Remembered By a Recipient

View Slideshow on [Youtube](#)

My son generously agrees to contribute a piece of his stimulus money to the unexpected car repair I find we need. After all, I argue, is not he the one who takes the SUV on long drives out to Long Island to buy chicken feed and hay and drives upstate to return his fellow classmate to her mother? We will need the car, I hope, to bring his brother to college in the fall. The expensive tuition must feel justified by my younger son's residency in an historic New England college town called Boston, Mass. Unless my elder son cleans out the car before we travel, his brother's comforter and bedrest pillow will arrive with him covered in certain evidence of the country life he is living here in Brooklyn.

The economic calculus of this pandemic is continually reassessed. Texas Lieutenant Governor [Dan Patrick](#) became momentarily famous when he indicated early on in the crisis that saving the economy of the nation by not asking people to stay home and effectively shutting down most businesses was worth the risk of imperiling the elderly. I will turn 62 myself during this pandemic, and have heard [various numbers](#) that regardless of the [cut-off](#) put me in a high risk category for dying from this disease. The category is of the elderly.

The Washington Post has maintained a continually updated [website](#) showing state-by-state the rise and fall of COVID-19 cases and tracks day-by-day openings and closings due to the virus. Florida became the poster child for moving too quickly with re-openings. In early June the state opened bars, bowling alleys and other venues. Within three weeks, the number of COVID cases in the state had reached nearly 9,000 and bars were closed statewide. Two short weeks later, restaurants, that had been opened with limited seating capacity, were closed for indoor dining.

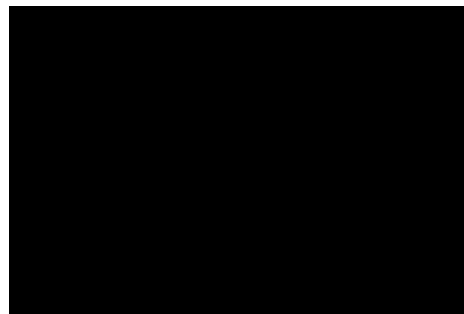
A week after Independence Day, Disney World reopened with its alternate reality small world and virus cases climbed over 11,000.

A smaller personal price many paid as a result of the pandemic was the inability to mark great milestones with a well-attended celebration. New York Public Radio, WNYC, was keen to compensate for the loss, running a midweek evening program, [Four Graduations and a Wedding](#), throughout the month of May. Commencement speeches and appearances from the likes of Andrew Yang and Alexandria Ocasia-Cortez aside, the commencement that caught my attention during the busy season was a [graduation ceremony via jet ski](#). This was a unique experience afforded to the one dozen lucky graduates of Key West High School, in Key West, Florida. With such a small number of graduates, one wonders if the group could not have held the event in a traditional auditorium with students spaced several seats apart. But the spirit of surviving through these days of social distancing seems to insist on creative accommodation and holding events out of doors whenever possible was the gold standard. And even when at an event out of doors, social distancing and mask wearing is considered to be the best precaution. In the early fall, when the President himself would contract COVID-19, his [packed, outdoor introduction of his Supreme Court nominee, Amy Coney Barret](#), would be criticized for the lack of masks, the close seating of attendees, and a later indoor event.


By mid-July we find out that the dramatic precautions of the socially-distanced jet-ski graduation near Key West may have been in vain when the state of Florida sets the national record for [highest number of new cases of COVID-19](#) recorded in one day. In contrast to the rarified image of blond and sun-tanned young people donned in maroon gowns and clutching mortarboards to their heads as they roared back to the docks lined up and well-turned out along the Gulf of Mexico, more likely images of the class of 2020 flashed across the screen in the hip-hop infused [Graduate Together 2020](#), a national graduation introduced by LeBron James. President Obama, tieless and seated in front of a triplet of sparsely ornamented white bookshelves, makes an inspiring speech to the graduates. One wonders what the [Room Rater](#) on Twitter would give the set up. [Ash Jian](#) loses points for his empty shelf, but it looks like the bobble heads saved him, though.

The opportunities to celebrate the graduations of my own children, my younger son from [Brooklyn Technical High School](#) and my younger daughter from Brooklyn College, abound. On May 28, the tension mounts in advance of the release of the BC graduation video, the one where I appear with chicken in arms to offer my congratulations. At precisely 10 am, President Michelle Anderson welcomes the graduates and their guests. My daughter, elegantly attired in a t-shirt, pink shorts,

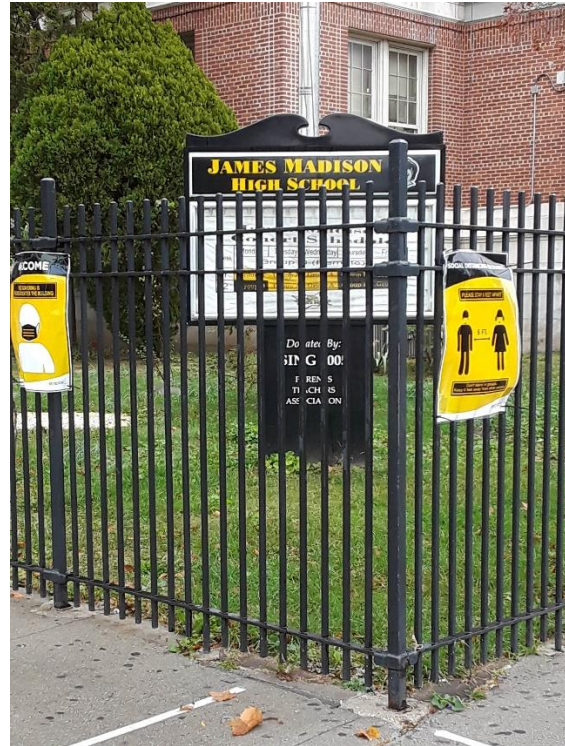
and carefully positioned mortar board, waits in front of the large screen TV as my two year old grandson rolls a turquoise exercise ball into the pit bull who backs into my daughters's boyfriend who spills his iced tea on the back of my older son who is reaching to grab the ball from his nephew. Throughout, snarky comments are exchanged by the members of the audience, no one is shushed, and on cue my daughter flips her tassel across her mortarboard as the [Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences announces her major](#). Following the live show, we drive down Bedford Avenue to return my daughter to her home, but pause momentarily to pose by the closed gates of the college for a handful of photos. This has become the custom. We wait for our turn as others do the same, and we are replaced by another family that has arrived after us.



(Click on embedded video or visit on [Youtube](#))

The author's daughter poses by the Brooklyn College gates on the day of her virtual graduation ( sound on!)

In June, all Brooklyn high school students are invited to a [graduation celebration](#) that feels more like a dance party on the 18th and on the 26th the roughly 1500 graduating seniors from Brooklyn Tech are invited to a more intimate ceremony. The students and their families get to sit through a half dozen or so awards, hear their valedictorian speak and watch for their names and faces to appear in a [three hour long video](#). Students from the neighborhood high school, James Madison, make it into the [New York Times](#) with a display of photos honoring each graduating senior attached to the fence surrounding the school. By the start of the school year (early October for New York City high schools), Madison had swapped out its caps and gowns for images of masks and social distancing and a posting of which days which groups of students could come into school for hybrid scheduling.



James Madison High School in Brooklyn shifts from the graduating class of 2020 to social distancing of incoming students in the fall

Returning

The weather in New York City the first weekend in May is irresistible. The citizens flock outside, [crowding park spaces](#), undisturbed, in wealthy, mostly white neighborhoods, and individuals [maskless while black](#) are knocked down by law enforcement for venturing onto the subway. By the third weekend of the month, there is a Saturday where the inside temperature of the house is still cooler than the rising, hot temperatures of the outside. The mayor of the city [resets the policy](#) on policing of social distancing requirements. A park developed on the abandoned waterfront property of a sugar refinery paints dozens of well-spaced [circles](#) across the expanse of its lawn. Couples who arrive together pour themselves carefully into the rings, like coffee and cream in a Starbucks latte.

Neighbors celebrate a month of May birthdays each Sunday in their back yard. Guests come, eat, laugh and brush up against each other, convinced that because they know each other, they are safe to choose as close companions. Scientists, experts, are already cautiously describing what may be an allowable [social bubble](#), a small group of people we can choose to be with though we do not live with them.

Face mask as a means to prevent disease from spreading has become both a [medically sanctioned protocol](#) and a politicized piece of attire in the war between [civil libertarians](#) and proponents of a collective good. According to the recently coalesced organization, [Mask4all](#), in mid-March of 2020, approximately ten nations required their citizens to wear face masks when out in public. By mid-May, more than 100 countries and ten states in the US required face masks. The uncertainty about the benefits of wearing masks was the fall-out of a data war, with the average Joe and Josephine befuddled about what to do as [recommendations seemed to change daily](#), and the [highest authority on public health](#) was accused of coming late to the masks-should-be-mandatory party. Early on the frantic messaging suggested that a [shortage of medical grade masks](#) meant that health care workers were ill-equipped to protect themselves on the job. At that moment, the thought of a non-essential worker wearing a KN95 mask, procured through some underground market and donned for a quick dash to the local deli to buy a beer, was a clear sign of selfishness at best and social deviance with homicidal inclinations, at worst.

I passed my partner in the living room one day during the lockdown working his way through the complete archive of the Twilight Zone on Netflix. In the midst of the personal protective equipment (PPE) supply crisis, he had reached the episode [The Masks](#), in which the money-hungry heirs of a dying old man are tricked into wearing, for all eternity, distorted, hideous masks that reveal their true, ugly selves.



Scene from an episode of the Twilight Zone

On a brighter side, the shortage of personal protective equipment sent [altruistic seamstresses](#) to work. The Brooklyn College Department of Theater [costume shop](#)

stepped up with the help of half a dozen volunteers who had their sewing machines clicking away in a relentless effort to outfit the faces of essential workers still reporting to work each day after the campus closed. An apparel industry executive, recently ousted from his CEO position following charges of malfeasance and knowingly allowing sexual harassment to continue at his business, [also jumped into the void](#), ready with the production and distribution know-how to mass produce facemasks and save the day. Three months into the game, however, the government shut down his operations when over 300 of his employees tested positive for COVID-19.

Creatives and fashionistas saw masks as an opportunity to make a fashion statement both [locally](#) and [globally](#). Diligent citizens made due with what they had, be it cabbage leaves in Palestine, a discarded five gallon milk jug in Indonesia, or old t-shirts, [patterns](#) courtesy of the United States Center for Disease Control. By mid-July, Etsy, the craft seller's web site, topped out at over [54,000](#) unique face mask designs. One, normally priced at \$15 and made with [vintage Ralph Lauren polobear fabric](#), was selling for \$766.16 when stocks ran low.

JezebelsFascination's "[Face Mask](#) Dust Gas Cyber Goth Punk Crystal Mouth Nose Silver Steampunk Filter Rhinestone Respirator Festival Burning Man Costume Covid 19" was more modestly priced at \$114.87. By early October, a [glittery god mask with matching skirt ensemble](#) could be had for as little as \$300.



Images of masks, masked citizens, and masked icons from the time of COVID-19
(author's compilation of free-to-share photos found on the [Creative Commons](#))

By the end of August, a republican [Texas congressman contracted COVID-19](#) and was convinced that he had gotten it from the mask he was asked to wear prior to planned travels with the president campaigning through the Longhorn state. Earlier in the same week, the president's [national security advisor was also diagnosed](#), but the country was assured that the Chief Executive and Commander in Chief and the Vice President were in no danger.

Stepping out into the world required more than just a mask. With live doctor visits resuming, any trip to a large medical facility required full screening at the entryway. The outpatients are asked numerous questions about their health and recent travels and given a requisite temperature check. The Hospital for Special Surgery awarded me with a "I have been screened" sticker on the same day I went to vote in person at the New York State primary. Voting, of course, always merits the good citizen a sticker. Like a well-behaved grade schooler, I was able to show off my sticker collection for the day. This was the same day I rode the subway for the first time since March (it was now the end of June), but I received no good-girl sticker from the MTA. Instead, I spent the ride pondering why anyone would travel

an hour in one direction and an hour back to carry out some task that lasted all of 15 minutes. I was getting used to telecommuting.



At the Flatbush Avenue stop, the end of the line and the Brooklyn College station, a crew jumps on and sanitizes each train before its return trip to the Bronx

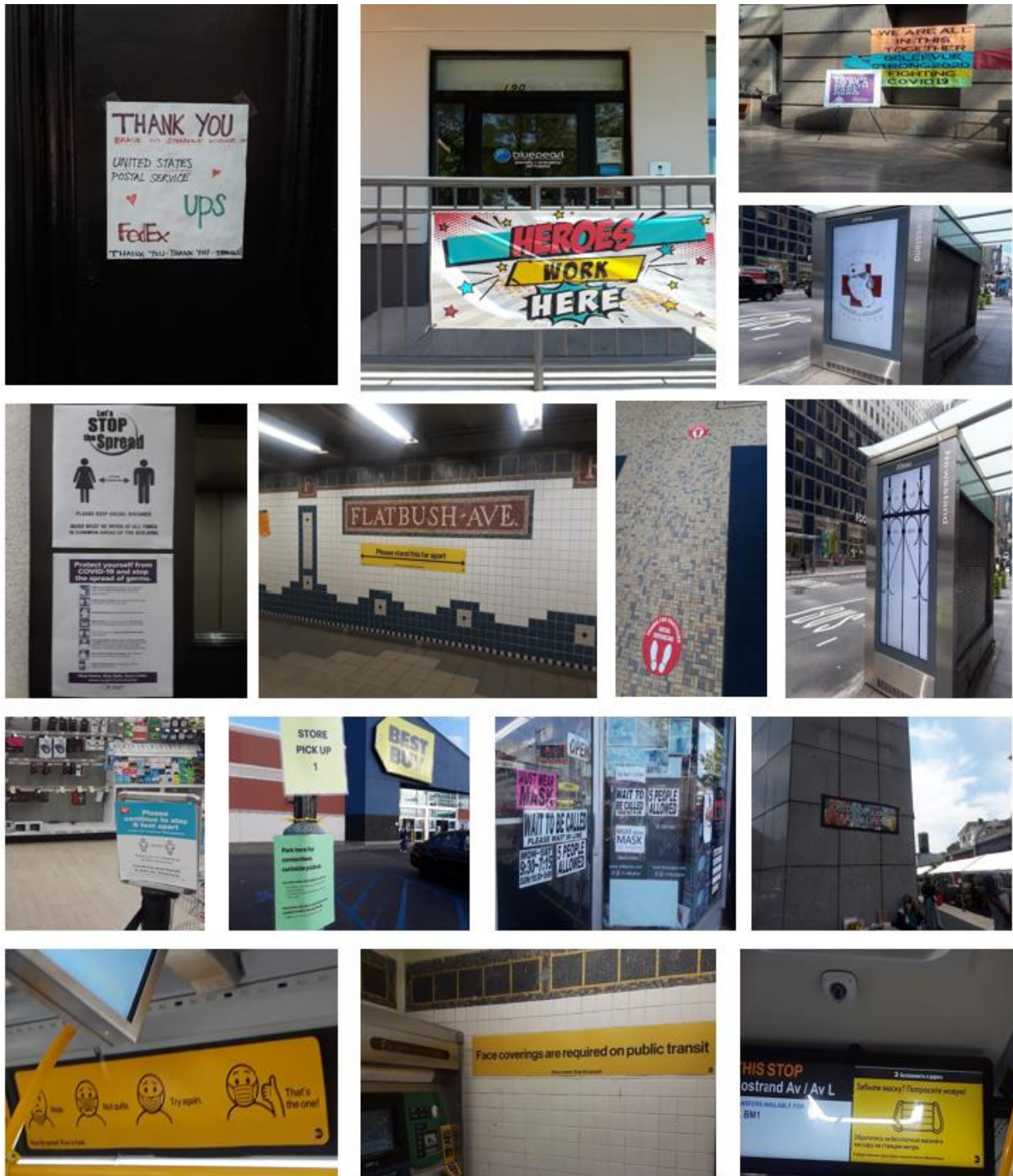


The author's sticker collection celebrating her first day out in the world following three months of sheltering at home

I had planned to vote in the June primaries absentee, but like so many of my fellow New Yorkers, I found the absentee voting process confusing. In my favor, I was a step ahead of my older son in this venture. He thought the envelope with the application to get an absentee ballot was the absentee ballot itself and so he left it on his dresser until it was too late to apply. His younger brother, who would be old enough to vote for his first time by November, was too young to register for the June primaries at the end of May. I had applied online and my ballot arrived at the end of May. Of course, I, too, ignored it and assumed I had plenty of time to take care of the vote. When I did open the envelope with the ballot, the ballot envelope and the mailer envelope, I filled out the ballot as instructed and then prepared the envelope for mailing. About to leave the house with my vote, I remembered hearing something about needing to sign the ballot envelope. I wasn't sure I had done that, but I also recalled something about not submitting any envelopes secured with scotch tape. If I opened the mailer envelope, I might have to scotch tape it closed again. But how else could I see if I had signed the ballot envelope? I took a chance, opened the mailer envelope, signed my ballot envelope and then flipped it over to see a little box on the reverse side asking me to fill in fields indicating my name, residence and election districts. I was confounded. The box had the appearance of boxes on forms that usually say, "for office use only." But this box didn't say that, not in English, Spanish or Mandarin. I gave up. I decided to risk this old body to the germs of my sons' former elementary school and headed out to vote in person. I exercised my franchise in a nearly meaningless primary for a party that had already chosen its candidate. It was a season of [cancelled and rescheduled primaries](#) across the nation.

Returning to the world meant constant encounters with messaging to:

- salute our heroes, the essential workers,
- stay six feet apart from others,
- prevent crowding in stores, or, better yet, opt for curbside pick-up,
- dine outside,
- avoid affectionate contact with loved ones not in our bubble, and, of course;
- wear masks.



Signs of the Times



(Click on embedded video or visit on [Youtube](#))

An electronic advertisement on 42nd Street and Third Avenue in Manhattan urging the public to protect themselves and others



Dining al fresco, the only option throughout the summer

Battleground

As a tenured, full-time employee at the City University of New York, I had retained my professorial job and received a steady paycheck throughout the pandemic. Whereas I bounded, tripped and fell often enough through the chaotic spring semester like an off-kilter kid in a bouncy castle, and reoriented reluctantly through the muggy summer semester, I readied to take on the fall classes with a semblance of preparedness. But I was one of the fortunate ones and knew I was compelled to step up for our discarded brethren. The [adjunct faculty of CUNY](#), nearly 3000 of them, were about to lose their jobs and their health insurance at a time when illness lurked behind every face mask and on every subway pole. Brooklyn College was preparing for 25% cuts in class offerings and seat capacity in remaining class sections multiplied like... like a virus. Administrator can reason wrongly that no longer contained by physical classrooms, where students in previous semesters crowded and battled for seating on top of window ledges when all traditional seats were taken, virtual classrooms could accommodate many. This approach fails to take into account the [limitations of the human teachers](#) to work with such large groups. A decided tension pulls between the concerns of pedagogy and the desire to see students move on steadily to graduation.

The Professional Staff Congress, representing 30,000 faculty, higher education officers and college laboratory technicians declared a #CUNYSummerOfStruggle with hashtags, [Zoom meetings](#), [social media blitzes](#), socially distanced [car and bicycle caravans](#), and masked and socially distanced [marches](#) appropriate for the lockdown.



#CutCOVIDNotCUNY



PSC_CUNY @PSC_CUNY · Mar 24

@NYSenDems @AndreaSCousins @sengianaris @LizKrueger CAN stay strong in the fight to #MakebillionairesPay & #FUNDCUNYNOW. #COVID19 will remake the NYS Budget. We'll need #BudgetJustice, not more austerity, to rebuild our economy.



20

11



#MakeBillionairesPay

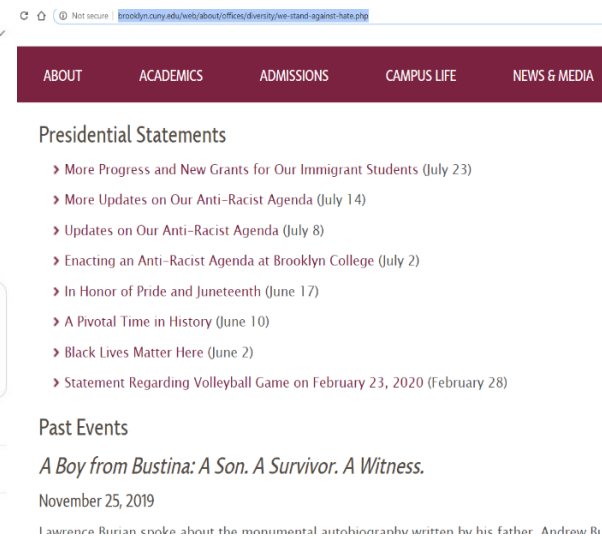
Confined by the disease, witnessing the economic fallout of job loss, we were all in a fighting spirit. Then at the end of May, an unarmed black man, George Floyd, is brutally murdered by the Minneapolis police, protestors spill out onto the streets and Zoom is supercharged with online activism. The president of the college, Michelle Anderson, makes statements, as do many in positions of power, and adds town halls and listening sessions to her ongoing diversity programming that comes under the broader heading, "[We Stand Against Hate](#)."

The organizers of the June 3 town hall, "We Should All Be Able to Breathe," two Black men who work for the college administration, Anthony Brown and David Wells, carefully weigh the pros and cons of having the president herself attend the town hall and decide against it, though high level administrators are seen occupying their Zoom cubbyholes in the audience. It is felt that the presence of the president might inhibit students who are encouraged to speak freely. The Black students and also staff and faculty are angry. They have stories of being harassed by the campus security force when they come through the guarded entrances. They see white colleagues and peers pass by unbothered every day. Muslim students recall when [undercover police infiltrated an Islamic student group](#), gained their trust, and kept them under surveillance for four years between 2011 and 2015.

I attend the virtual town hall and a student from Bedford-Stuyvesant speaks about writing to local and state legislators and the legislators and police department in Minneapolis to let them know the pain her neighbors feel and changes they want to see. A [recent letter writing campaign](#) to the governor of New York asking him not to hang CUNY out to dry in these times of the double pandemic (COVID-19 and systemic racism) recently circulated among Brooklyn College faculty and others and was signed by over 2000 people. That campaign inspires me to reach out to the student writing in the town hall Zoom chat and suggest we compile multiple letters from CUNY students, gather many additional signatures, and send the resulting

document en masse to city and state officials. Several students are on board and a junior, [Nasim](#), steps up to organize and lead. Within minutes, he has posted a Google document and the letters begin to come in quickly over the next few days. [The Hundred Letter Challenge!](#) and a follow-up campaign at the end of June, [Mark One Month](#), results in a dozen letters or so and nearly 100 signatures from CUNY students, faculty and supporters that go to city council representatives, the mayor, state assembly men and women, New York State senators and the state district attorney, A CUNY graduate herself.

The president's town hall event, originally promoted through email, social media and on the college website, oddly disappears from (or maybe never was on?) the list of past events on the "We Stand Against Hate" BC website, buried instead in a Zoom link embedded in the president's statement on June 2.



A battle of events ensues, with President Anderson issuing statements condemning racism and scheduling listening sessions, and students and faculty of color offering their own events. A well-coordinated and well-publicized Zoom session, "[What Would a Black Life Affirming Campus Look Like](#)," scheduled for the second Tuesday in July is upstaged when the president slips in the [first Anti-Racist Listening Session](#) the Monday immediately preceding the prior scheduled event. Observers would be understandably confused, like first time attendees at a professional conference who are expected to choose among a smorgasbord of competing workshops touching on similar topics. The activists insist that the leader of the college is trying to control the agenda and is being as she has always been [deaf](#) to their [demands](#). They protest in front of the locked gates of Brooklyn College and then march on the president's house in Ditmas Park.



(Click on image above to view video on Vimeo)

Video made of the PSC-CUNY organized march on President Anderson's house, July 6, 2020

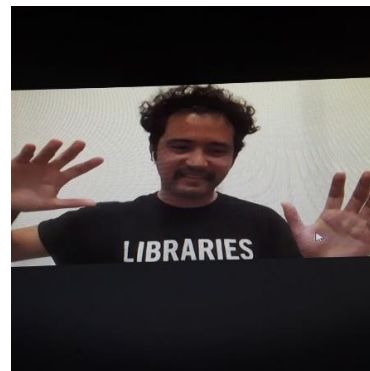
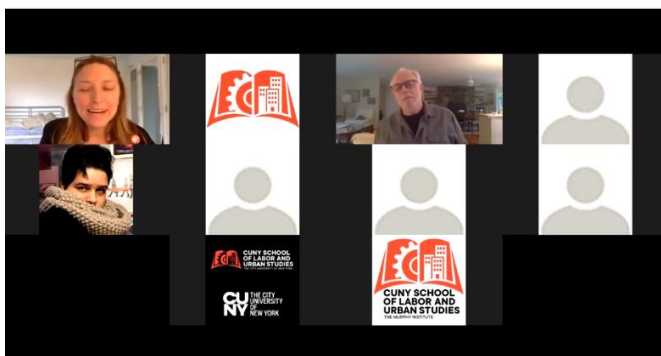
A new group, the Anti-Racist Coalition (ARC), forms at Brooklyn College, complete with a [social media tool kit](#). ARC green screens will begin to appear with regularity at Zoom meetings during the coming months.



#BlackStudentVoicesMatter

The CUNY School of Labor and Urban Studies (SLUS) presents an online panel in early June, "[Fighting For CUNY/Rebuilding NYC.](#)" [Penny Lewis](#), associate

professor at SLUS opens with the comment that “NY faces unprecedented crises. The pandemic and massive unemployment have laid bare the racism, economic inequality and leadership failures that have made these crises possible.” The panelists include [Stephen Brier](#), [Jamell Henderson](#), [Andrea Ades Vasquez](#) and [Justin Sanchez](#). It is Justin who catches my eye. COVID hair, curly and springing out every which way on top of his head, moustache drooping down on either side of his lips, he looks like a more benign Groucho Marx without the trademark glasses. Justin is one of the co-chairs of the SLUS student union, and as he speaks with great animation, the word “libraries” slowly emerges above the horizon of his Zoom screen. His bobbing t-shirt teases us with some hidden words. I am curious, and add my question to the Zoom Q&A. “Tell us about your connection to libraries, Justin,” I ask, wondering what he will have to say about CUNY libraries. The moderator will later skip over my question, but Justin sees it in the chat and is eager to use the precious time to recall his childhood memories of going to the library with his mom. I cringe. CUNY libraries are on the brink of losing the millions needed to fund a server farm’s worth of high quality research databases and CUNY faculty and students think fondly of their libraries as the places they can go to read books. There is no chance to jump in with my CUNY-specific library story, and I miss my opportunity again when Helene Weinstein, our local state assemblywoman is invited into a Zoom meeting with the PSC. The mother-son pair, my BC student son and I, are the only non-PSC employee attendees. Only my son is asked to talk. Who wouldn’t want to listen to a student’s story over the story of an old and tired librarian? Shush, her. It is confirmed that I am poorly constructed for this sudden work of activism that has been thrust upon us.





Justin Sanchez, CUNY School of Labor and Urban Studies, on Libraries at June 11, 2020 panel “[Fighting For CUNY/Rebuilding NYC](#)”

Whether or not I am constructed for this anti-racism work, it weaves in and out of my life throughout the summer and early fall. I worked closely with Nasim in the letter writing campaign that came out of the June 3 town hall. Nasim is a heady combination of education advocate and never-tiring public relations nudge. He persistently but politely develops useful connections with faculty, elected officials, union activists, journalists and anyone he wants to engage in a conversation about supporting public education. Nasim, one year shy of completing his Brooklyn College degree in education and history in a scant two and a half years, is already speaking of his desire to pick up two masters degrees, one in special education and one in educational leadership, before he wraps up the plan with a PhD in educational advocacy. He intends to become a school principal. I tell him he should run for City Council. This is the summer in which [Jamaal Bowman](#), a progressive democratic school principal in the Bronx, upsets the 16-term incumbent [Eliot Engel](#) in the Democratic primary. This is the summer in which Nasim speaks on behalf of CUNY before [the New York City Council Committee on Higher Education](#) the week following the first Brooklyn College town hall. This will be Nasim’s third appearance before the City Council on Zoom this spring.

When not fighting for CUNY, Nasim is quoted on behalf of [essential grocery workers](#). As a son of Yemeni immigrants and one of seven children, Nasim contributed hours in his family’s neighborhood bodega during the pandemic just as he always has throughout his young life. He brings me into his circle of care as I share whatever information I can with him on the way CUNY works. In the fall, his self-named gmail account is hacked and I worry that anti-Islamic sentiments were somehow involved. I make a trip the same day this happens to Nasim to the post office to buy postcard stamps for the cards I will be filling out in the [Postcards](#)

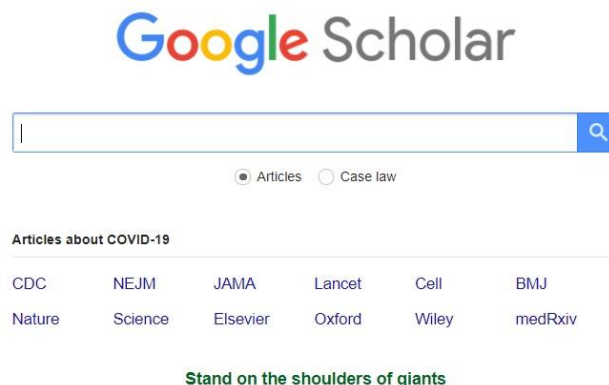
[to Swing States](#) campaign. The [struggling post office](#), I am not surprised to learn, has no postcard stamps to sell. I wonder if the United States government ran a bakery, if it would not have rolls to sell. I suck up the irritation of the extra four dollars I need to spend to buy first class postage, but am eager to review what is available among the commemorative stamps. I notice out of the corner of my eye, hip hop stamps and vegetable illustrations. The Black clerk asks me which commemoratives I would prefer: vegetables or women get the vote. I am acutely aware that she has skipped over offering me the hip hop stamps. I so want to buy those. Why? So I can make a statement that white people can be expansive enough to delight in a piece of Black culture? To deliberately make a point to the clerk that I want those stamps that come from the culture of her people even though she did not offer them to me? Would that be making a subtle cultural appropriation? I decide on the women get the vote stamps. Once again I show myself never to be the daring customer. I remember Maxine Hong Kingston's confession in her memoir *Woman Warrior* that shyness always kept her from requesting commemorative stamps at the post office. I was long past my own pride in overcoming that same barrier that I shared with the author, but nowhere near daring a Black postal worker to believe that I truly wanted hip hop commemorative stamps whether she offered them to me or not. It was only after I walked out of the post office that I realized the appropriateness of choosing the women get the vote stamps for the get out the vote postcard campaign. I still felt I carried the burden of so many failures – my failure in confidence and all those failures of our racist and divided country that were leaving its post office for broke at a time when so many were planning to send their ballots for the next presidential election by mail. The lack of postcard stamps was just one symptom of a larger national problem.

The Black Lives Matter movement intersects with my job as the fall semester opens. My department, in keeping with an aspirational annual process, gives the provost its list of desired faculty lines. The library has dropped its demand to put a weekend librarian in place. The library which will not be open in the fall, has a weak argument to make for needing a full-time faculty hire to staff the reference desk and keep an eye on the nearly 200,000 square feet during the weekends. What it does need, what all the college departments need, are more faculty of color. Brooklyn College ranks [near the bottom](#) of the CUNY campuses in its number of black faculty and shows a decided [mismatch](#) between the racial and ethnic demographics between its faculty and students. The department submits to the provost a job for a user services and emerging technologies librarian who will do

collection development work and instruction in the areas of Africana studies and Puerto Rican and Latino studies. I have covered these subject areas the 26 years I have worked at the college, developed relationships with the faculty in the departments that go beyond a good working relationships, and yet I have often thought of the different impression a librarian who looks more like the students she is teaching might make on the students. Nonetheless, I am not consulted in the decision. Moving beyond the slight, I debate with a colleague the importance of having Black or Latinx people teaching library skills for these subjects and the larger need to integrate POC scholars as teachers in any subject area the curriculum covers.

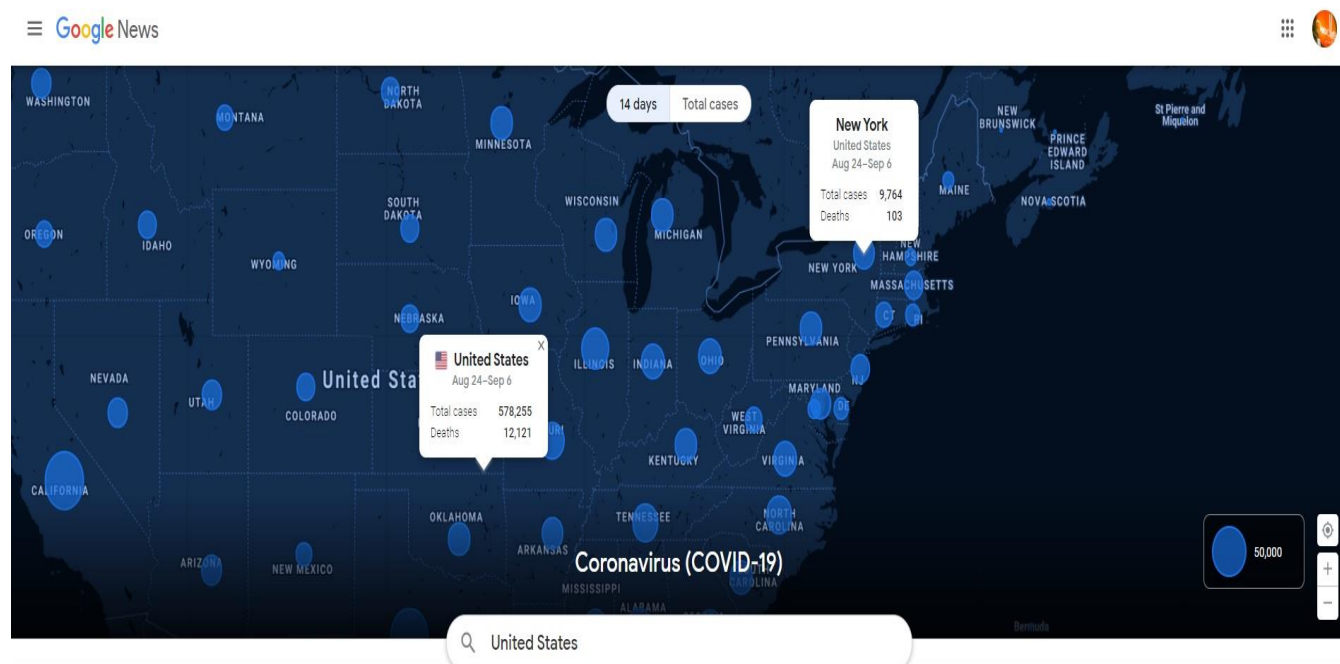
I doubt that anyone will join the Brooklyn College faculty any time soon, as is the [nature of the process](#), and I expect to be in my job for the duration. We are in a semester of getting down to business and there is more than enough work to go around for the few we can count on. The days of hysterical cries of “What can you expect? We are in the middle of a pandemic!” have transformed to calendars cluttered with Zoom meetings and a serious expectation that we will handle this work of educating students with the best pedagogical practices while maintaining the highest standards of expectations and assessment.

For Google Scholar, a favorite academic search tool of both the researcher and lay learners alike, the virus is an ever-new concern. Alternatively, teachers and learners at many institutions are turning their attention to a broader world of knowledge and digging back into history, around the globe and to the stars to explore people, events and natural phenomenon that have been with us way longer than COVID-19.



Google Scholar highlights up to the moment scholarly research on COVID-19 each day on the front of its web site

The week the City University of New York resumes classes, daily deaths from the virus top 12,000. Deaths in all of New York State hover slightly above 100, down from around 800 when the virus peaked in our area at the beginning of April.



COVID-19 Death Statistics in the United States, August 24-September 26

Neighbors of mine celebrate the end of summer with fireworks on my block in southern Brooklyn, but in other areas neighbors feel they are living in a [war zone](#).



(Click on embedded video or visit on [Youtube](#))

Wrapping up the summer of 2020 with fireworks

By October, [my neighborhood](#) will wear like a shawl over one shoulder and down its side the zip codes of three other neighborhoods that are once again required to go into lockdown as the virus resurges in New York City.

I pass a large memorial mural on Butler Street in Gowanus on one of my many visits to the veterinarian. I don't recognize the name of the pictured victim, a child, holding up what appears to be a traffic sign. I begin to wonder if George Floyd's name and face will become unrecognized one day, but then realize that the names of those killed by the hands of police may stand a better chance of becoming engrained in the collective brains of our society than the names of those, usually pedestrians or bike riders, who are killed by hit and run drivers,. I am not so sure. Motorists who kill bike riders are [rarely charged with homicide](#) and police who killed unarmed civilians are [rarely charged either](#). With so few killers ever being charged, those in mourning will continue to paint memorials, on [walls](#) and on [streets](#), and hope that we remember the names of the innocent departed ones, though their killers so often are not brought to justice.