

## Forum Introduction

### *Frailty and Strength During COVID-19*

*Journal entry, November 10, 2020: 176 days alone. 176 out of 178. Too many days. Except for my visit to see Andrew Dunn, and one trip to the comic book shop, I've been by myself. I wake up, walk downstairs, make coffee, go to the computer, and start working via Zoom. I eat lunch six feet away. Then it's back to the table. Then back to bed. I wake up, walk downstairs, make coffee, go to the computer. Occasionally there's DoorDash or Kroger's pick-up parking. Then back to bed. I wake up, walk downstairs, make coffee, go to the computer...*

*I'm going mad.*

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Since the pandemic began in March of 2020, we (Tony and I) have wavered about doing a COVID-19 special issue for *JoAE*. It's not that we don't think it is important. It is. It's not that we didn't receive submissions. We did. It boiled down to a few important concerns. First, we are still in the midst of the pandemic. News about the pandemic breaks at least once a day. When I began this draft in November 2000 there was no vaccine. Now there are at least three vaccines in production, while the pandemic simultaneously worsens in many parts of the globe. Events are happening so fast that we are all in the process of sensemaking.<sup>1</sup> Second, because we are struggling to make sense, writing retrospective evocative autoethnographies full of rich and thick descriptions is tenuous.<sup>2</sup> We feared rushed autoethnographies written in the middle of a pandemic might age as well as a "Trump 2020" chant. Finally, because COVID is ubiquitous, it is exhausting. However, we also knew we needed to do something. This forum is our compromise.

COVID-19 is the obvious thread in each of these seven manuscripts. There are, however, four other important themes that run through them: work, family, home, and hope. First, the pandemic caused immediate and radical changes to academic work, including teaching, writing, and collaborating.<sup>3</sup> The authors tackle the dilemmas of teaching exclusively online and/or the dangers of having to teach face to face. From the graduate student forced to teach online for the first time, to the associate professor

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recognizing his position of privilege, to the nontenured faculty watching the tenuousness of their positions change in real time, the authors question the veracity of their identities as academics, as well as the power and motivations of their institutions.

Another major theme is family. Unfortunately, the close quarters the pandemic imposes has led to more neglect, child and domestic abuse, addition, suicide, and poverty.<sup>4</sup> We are trying to keep our families safe, and our families are trying to keep us safe. Yet family gatherings are also dangerous COVID-spreading events.<sup>5</sup> Families keep us from isolation, but can also be prisons.<sup>6</sup> Happily that is not the case with our authors. Whether discussing children, parents, grandparents, partners, or “chosen families,”<sup>7</sup> within this forum families are in various stages of development and change.

The third theme is closely related to the second. Home. It too has dual meanings. Normally home is considered a place of refuge and shelter from the outside world.<sup>8</sup> However, home is also confining. We are quarantined, sequestered, and secluded. The coronavirus has us trapped inside. For better and for worse, the pandemic has trapped some of us inside our heads, alone with our thoughts.<sup>9</sup> In these pieces you can see the pleasures and claustrophobias of home, as well as headspaces for mindfulness and growth.

Finally, each piece is hopeful, in its own way. There is hope in new and rebuilt intimate relationships. There is the hope of creating more flexible workplaces and workplace partnerships. There’s the hope of building new communities. There is hope in self-care and well-being. There is hope that soon there will be a new normal that looks less like the old normal, that the new ways will be different from the old ways. Not all the authors go into detail about each theme, but if you read closely, you can see that they are all there.

Starting us off, a frustrated Megan Duff writes about being stuck. Stuck in the house. Stuck without resources. Stuck without technology. Stuck in rural Appalachia. Stuck in a region that is ignored, disregarded, and snubbed. Stuckness made worse in the midst of a pandemic. In a similar vein, an angry Karen V. Lee sends us into a panic, over shut-downs, stay-at-home orders, and quarantines. She rages against the willful ignorance of the irresponsible. She wails against the frustrations and the new normal. Yet, she also finds moments of serenity and calm.

In contradistinction, David Carless gently describes our alienation and our isolation. He reminds us that autoethnographic writing is often lonely. He presents a performance ethnography reflecting on the death of his father and the promise of community created through our work. Art Herbig discusses how the pandemic turned numerous professional opportunities into dilemmas and questions with no easy answers. He interrogates his own position of privilege and how he must rely on a community of others in these uncertain times. Thomas Townsend and Kallie Gay show us the precariousness of the academic underclass during the coronavirus pandemic. They show the tenuousness of the ultimate balancing act: teaching their classes online, assisting their children who are learning online, and pushing back against an administration that disconfirms them.

For Brian Johnston the pandemic offered the possibility of renewal and rejuvenation. Using his love of carpentry, the love of his children, and an important guiding text, Johnston exudes the serenity that once eluded him. As the pandemic raged, Johnston rebuilt his spiritual and emotional core. Finally, Chris Patti and Abby Arnold tell us their

love story, about how they are negotiating their new relationship in the midst of the pandemic. Along the way they teach us about the grander ideals so often missing in our day-to-day dealings: love, compassion, empathy, justice, and seeing the humanity in all of us.

Like all autoethnographies, these contributions are partial and problematic.<sup>10</sup> The authors who wrote them are living beings undergoing change. In the future their interpretations of events might evolve.<sup>11</sup> The world itself might transform in ways we cannot yet imagine. These authors capture the here and the now. That's all that we can ask of them, and we are better off for it.

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*Journal entry, November 18, 2020: The car rolls into the driveway, as the eight-and-a-half-hour drive ends. My brother and Mom come through the gate to greet me with bear hugs and smiles. Waves of relief flow off of me. Real human connection. Real human touch. It's day 179. Winter break came early. ■*

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ANDREW F. HERRMANN (PhD, University of South Florida) is associate professor of communication studies at East Tennessee State University and co-founding co-editor (with Tony Adams) of the *Journal of Autoethnography*. In 2020 he authored *Organizational Communication Approaches to the Works of Joss Whedon* (Rowman & Littlefield), and edited *The Routledge International Handbook of Organizational Autoethnography* (Routledge).

#### NOTES

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4. Rafael Guerra Lund, Scheila Manica, and Giselle Mânica, "Collateral Issues in Times of Covid-19: Child Abuse, Domestic Violence and Femicide," *Revista Brasileira de Odontologia Legal* 7, no. 2 (2020). doi: 10.21117/rbol-v7n22020-318; Simona Zaami, Enrico Marinelli, and Maria Rosaria Vari, "New Trends of Substance Abuse During COVID-19 Pandemic: An International Perspective," *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 11 (2020): 700. doi:10.3389/fpsy.2020.00700; Martin Amory, Maryia Markhvida, Stéphane Hallegatte, and Brian Walsh, "Socio-economic Impacts of COVID-19 on Household Consumption and Poverty," *Economics of Disasters and Climate Change* 4, no. 3 (2020): 453–479. doi: 10.1007/s41885-020-00070-3; Jilly Boyce Kay, "'Stay the Fuck at Home!': Feminism, Family and the Private Home in a Time of Coronavirus," *Feminist Media Studies* (2020): 1–6. doi: 10.1080/14680777.2020.1765293
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