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How to teach anthropology in a pandemic?

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By João Biehl and Onur Günay

“... a deadly pestilence is in our town, strikes us and spares not, and the house of Cadmus is emptied of its people while Black Death grows rich in groaning and lamentation... Raise up our city, save it and raise it up... If you rule this land... better to rule it full of people than empty. For neither tower nor ship is anything when ... none live in it together.”

—Sophocles, Oedipus the King^[1]



Gaetano Previati, *The Monatti*, illustration to Alessandro Manzoni's *I Promessi Sposi*, ca. 1895–99. Watercolor, heightened with white gouache, on light brown wove paper, 23.2 x 32.2 cm. Princeton University Art Museum. Museum purchase, Felton Gibbons Fund.

How do we teach when a pandemic undoes our taken-for-granted ways of knowing, acting, and relating?

Every spring semester class was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic,

which instituted campus lockdowns around the world and forced instruction to move online or to be halted altogether.

But [Medical Anthropology](#) might be the rare Princeton University course that was actually deepened and enriched by the life-altering circumstances of the pandemic, since it focuses on the interconnectedness of disease, the body politic, and the arts of care, as well as the power of storytelling in the face of the unknown.

Amidst all kinds of uncertainties, our Medical Anthropology class has creatively transitioned to online instruction, with an [updated syllabus](#) to engage current events. Drawing from history, critical theory, ethnography, and the arts, the course became a vital forum for students to grapple with the multifaceted medical, social, and political-economic challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Turbulent forces unfolding around us made key medical anthropology concepts—such as structural violence, racialization, technologies of invisibility, local biologies, body techniques, human plasticity, experimentality, pharmaceuticalization, and technologies of caregiving—markedly meaningful and relevant. These concepts and the ethnographic realities they sprang from became ever more generative as students engaged online with the concrete concerns of community partners and crafted artistic projects interrogating our altered present.

Working together, even at a distance, Medical Anthropology students created an [online platform](#) showcasing their critical takes on life during COVID-19.

What Can Art Tell Us about Pandemics?

Initially, we considered how past plagues were explained and addressed in the absence of scientific knowledge and clear medical armamentarium. Engaging historical accounts and artworks from the [Princeton University Art Museum](#) (from the Bubonic Plague in early modern Europe to HIV/AIDS in the late 20th century), we learned how plagues occasioned new forms of control and political power and socially mobilized constituencies facing mass death.^[2]



Carlo Coppola, *The Pestilence of 1656*. Oil on canvas, 76 x 99 cm. Princeton University Art Museum. Museum purchase, Caroline G. Mather Fund.

There is no work of art that is *not* resisting death.^[3] Facing and resisting death in all its forms —social, biological, and political — the arts and the humanities, so vilified and devalorized by those wishing to train the next generation of *homo economicus*, have greatly helped our students to cultivate a critical sensibility in the face of the task at hand today.

Similarly, Susan Sontag's book *Regarding the Pain of Others* gave us tools to probe the ethics and politics of representation in times of crisis. "Photographs," Sontag insists, "are a means of making 'real' (or 'more real') matters that the privileged and the merely safe might prefer to ignore."^[4] Being a spectator of calamities is, after all, "a quintessential modern experience" through which the other is rendered as someone to be seen, "not someone (who like us) also sees."^[5] While such a photographic enactment might occasion a fleeting sense of compassion, it is ultimately depoliticizing in its detachment, as deeper histories and geopolitical interconnections are left unaccounted for.

Through processes of framing and excluding, representations create a body politic and sediment moral values. Images are not innocent. They *do* things in the world. We learned to critically interpret emergent representations (including numbers) of the COVID-19 pandemic, as they

are mobilized by governments, media, medics, and the general public.

Structural Violence and COVID-19

Unencumbered by tyrannical extracurricular activities and searching for a language to navigate the uncertain, students were ever present online. Along with emergent essays on the pandemic, we read anthropological literatures on race, medical experimentation, the politics of science, pathologies of power, environmental toxicity, and the practices of making up people and living through injury—all themes that acquired a new salience and urgency with COVID-19.

We were delighted to see that students actually looked forward to Zoom breakout rooms, where they caught up with each other and further probed the readings and their present-day resonances. They were asked to write collective reflections, thus harnessing their critical capacities for analytical reasoning and blogging.

As the Medical Anthropology course unfolded, we examined how the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the precariousness of our systems of preparedness as well as the forms of structural violence that exacerbate vulnerability, rates of mortality, and disparities in care.

We were greatly inspired by the powerful artwork of [LaToya Ruby Frazier](#). In *The Notion of Family*^[6], she exposes the environmental predation, state disinvestment, and everyday violence that marks the life chances of generations of African-Americans, surviving America's boom and bust cycles. Moreover, as the pandemic unfolded, we witnessed in real time how those logics continued to operate in times of worldwide crisis, in new shapes and forms.



LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Landscape of the Body (Epilepsy Test)*, 2011. Gelatin silver print, 61 × 101.6 cm. Courtesy of the Artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York / Rome.

Lack of investment in public health and deeply entrenched inequalities within and across countries has amplified the impact of the pandemic. COVID-19 continues to spread and kill unevenly along the lines of age, class, race, gender, and geography.

The pandemic has also been dangerously politicized (as we see in the United States, Brazil, and Turkey), exposing the erosion of democracy, the curtailing of the rights of marginalized peoples, the expensive and inept search for magic bullets, and the rampant disregard for human lives.

Students Partner with Community Stakeholders

Excitingly, several service organizations in the Princeton area agreed to online collaborations with our students for their final Medical Anthropology projects. Eager to stay engaged and connected to their peers in this time of social distancing, half of this class of sixty readily subscribed to these group projects, supported by [Princeton's Program for Community-Engaged Scholarship \(ProCES\)](#), and [the Pace Center's Service Focus program](#). Students learned to carry out online interviews and to place local health problems in historical and broader demographic, epidemiological, and policy perspectives.

As the groups produced deliverables relevant to our community partners

envisioning a future during and after COVID-19 (e.g., annotated bibliographies, infographics, outreach materials, blueprints for public health campaigns, and visualizations of community stories and activism), they also reflected on their own knowledge-making practices through visual concept maps and critical writing.

These community-at-a-distance exercises were immensely rewarding experiences for all parties involved, giving each one something to look forward to.

Olivia Chen '22, Amital Haas '21, Jamie Kim '22 and Sophia Peifer '21, for example, collaborated with the New Jersey [Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide](#) (SPTS), helping the organization to assess its outreach practices and to generate alternative tools for stress management among school-going students most at-risk to teenage suicide. The group also created a [video](#) resource that addressed ways of coping with the emotional and mental-health risks of the COVID-19 pandemic among youth. This video was immediately publicized by the organization's social media.

"Inspired to see the relevance of their studies in an altered 'real world,' many of our students came to understand that 'real world' assignments don't come with formulaic guidelines and directions," said Anthropology Graduate Student Ipsita Dey, one of the course's teaching assistants. "They realized that we must use our scholarship, our personal experiences, our initiatives, and our creative capabilities to make the best possible deliverables for those we team up with and to bring the insights gained back to classroom learning."



Service Focus group meeting with our partners from the [Creative](#)

[Resilience Collective](#), May 5, 2020.

The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented “acute-on-chronic”^[7] problem. It exposes historically entrenched inequalities and the politics of representation that has harmed and further marginalized poor communities in our plagued cities. Some of the course’s community-engaged projects were thus aimed at visualizing alternative histories of the present.

Mary Davis ’22, Grace Simmons ’22, and Ilya Yatsishin ’22, for instance, collaborated to produce [an interactive website](#) that features the interview of Moses, a long-time North Philadelphia resident. They connected his intimate perception of the opioid epidemic with the broader themes of “war on poor people,” harm reduction, political action, and media misconceptions of the Kensington neighborhood. Working closely with the [Creative Resilience Initiative](#), the group explored the neighborhood’s rich grassroots histories, uncovering voices often left out of mainstream narratives and chronicling Kensington residents’ continuous struggles to shape their lived environment and the stories of their lives.

All in all, Medical Anthropology’s dynamic online collaborations revealed new forms of practical solidarity emergent during the pandemic as well as activist efforts for risk mitigation and social protection.

Creative COVID-19 Works

As our students learned to critique representations in times of crisis, they were adamant that not representing at all is also a failure. So, the question of representation was further complexified. Who represents? And with whom do we represent? Through which means? What escapes representation?

Medical Anthropology gave students tools to think critically about their own perceptions and representational practices and challenged them to experiment with collaborative and multimodal forms of representation.

A significant number of students used humanistic lenses and artistic tools to explore how the COVID-19 pandemic is impacting the politics of public health, viral economies, caregiving, and medical ethics. Critically engaging emergent literatures and media, these groups of two have produced thoughtful audio-visual and artistic projects.

Hilcia Acevedo ’23 and Nannette Beckley ’23, for example, produced the website [Urban Vulnerability During the Covid-19 Pandemic](#). They deployed a range of creative data-visualization methods and sources

(photography, journalistic accounts, and testimonies from various publics), highlighting how racial and ethnic minorities and the poor on the frontlines of essential service industries are trying to protect themselves as they deal with the threats of COVID-19 and economic meltdown.



Homepage of the project Urban Vulnerability During the Covid-19 Pandemic by Hilcia Acevedo and Nannette Beckley.

Inspired by Jorge Furtado's classic short film [Island of Flowers](#) and the anthropological work of Ruth Benedict,^[8] Rowan Pierson '22 & Katya Vera '20 created the [film](#) *Plasticity in a Plagued World*. Cunningly crafted, the film explores how the meanings and associations of words—such as class, race, employment, and essential—are being recast and re-projected amidst the pandemic's new normal and the Class of 2020's sense of a lost future.

"The real-time disruptions caused by COVID-19 compelled our students to anchor their thinking and writing within an Anthropology whose possibilities ranged from the prosaic to the planetary and from the singularities of interlocutors to the abiding structures of viral economies and inequalities in which they are bound," said teaching assistant Nikhil Pandhi, an Anthropology Graduate Student. "The course then became a significant lens to examine a world of mounting unknowns as also a lantern to illuminate and imagine a future beyond them."

A Relentless Social Science of the Unknown

As the students shuttled relentlessly between their own unequal experiences of quarantine and ever-changing pandemic projections, Medical Anthropology became a compass of sorts for many. Throughout

our online journey, students acquired a renewed appreciation of situated knowledge and historically attuned analysis, developing a sharp critique of present-day medical capitalism and the new capillaries of biopower.

As their engaged and creative works show, they want the world back.

But a healthier, more just, and more inclusive world.

A greener world, more ingeniously caring (even if at a distance).

In years past, we showcased the students' community-engaged and creative projects at a [Fair](#), open to our partners and larger University community. This year, the students collectively produced the online platform [Medical Anthropology in the Time of COVID-19](#), drawing from their technological savviness, artistic skills, and critical probing.

As you visit [the website](#), we hope you share our excitement in the critical force of Medical Anthropology as it interfaces with the arts and the humanities in seeking to produce people-centered, socially meaningful, and politically relevant knowledge for our times.

We are immensely proud of our students' thoughtful responses amid the pandemic upheaval and excited with the enthralling new field of pedagogical possibilities that the course and its multiple partnerships opened up for us all.

"This initiative reminds us how much we have to learn," the luminous literary scholar Arcadio Díaz-Quiñones has noted. "And also how much imagination, solidarity and artfulness are required in the process of learning. What else is teaching really about?"^[9]

[João Biehl](#), *Susan Dod Brown Professor of Anthropology and Director of the Brazil LAB, Princeton University.*

[Onur Günay](#), *Postdoctoral Research Associate at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University.*

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Endnotes

[1] Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, trans. David Grene (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 12.

[2] David S. Jones, "History in a Crisis – Lessons for Covid-19," *The New England Journal of Medicine*, April 30, 2020, <http://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMp2004361>. See also Michel Foucault, "Panopticism," in *Discipline and Punish*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 195-202.

[3] João Biehl, "Having an Idea in Anthropology Today," *Kroeber Anthropological Society Papers*, no. 100 (2011): 20-24. See also João Biehl and Peter Locke, *Unfinished: The Anthropology of Becoming* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

[4] Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003), 7.

[5] Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003), 72.

[6] LaToya Ruby Frazier, *The Notion of Family*, (New York: Aperture, 2014).

[7] Paul Farmer, *Haiti After the Earthquake*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2011).

[8] Ruth Benedict, "Anthropology and the Abnormal," in *An Anthropologist at Work: Writings of Ruth Benedict* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959), 262-283.

[9] Arcadio Díaz-Quñones, personal communication, May 15, 2020.

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