

"I intended this diary to be about the world, but it turned out to be a snapshot of my consciousness."

New York City, Lucedale, MS, Nashville, TN, 23 March – 22 June 2020

I am an anthropology candidate, and my goal to disembark the shores of the tropical Rio de Janeiro this summer for nine-month-long fieldwork has shattered into pieces. Unsettlement is what I am dealing with.

Just before the COVID crisis, I returned from my home in Lithuania. I spent a couple of weeks with my mother since her health is on and off. I keep reconsidering the decision to come back to the reddest dot in the Corona map on earth. I also asked my roommate to move out, little did I know back then that confinement was about to start. Overall, I enjoy my sunny and cozy solitary cell in Boerum Hill, Brooklyn. Sometimes it just gets too solitary, not to mention expensive. Looking for a new person just seems too much of a risky idea right now.

My boyfriend James just moved to New York and lives in Greenpoint. He is the only person I see and sometimes bike with. On a windy and grey day, only the piece of road populated by the Hasidic community continues its life. It feels like a surreal scene from David Lynch's movie when crossing it.

March 23rd, Monday, 5:41 pm

A friend, who shamed me for planning to go to Nashville (a trip originally planned for this upcoming weekend and canceled due to Corona) reached out to me with a

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suggestion to flee our apartments and go on a clandestine trip to Austin, Texas. Imagine – 30 degrees celsius, a barbeque, and a backyard. I just got rid of my roommate, so leaving a space free of foreign problems, attitudes, dirty coffee mugs, and paying yet another rent does sound too alluring. On the other hand, nothing else really does. Neither the opportunity to finish unfinished projects, nor meditations, nor watching Netflix all day long. In fact, everything sucks. But maybe this week will be the one turning the sentiments of unsettlement into something more settled.

March 24th, Tuesday, 5:20 pm

My room is covered in tiny blurbs of lights formed by midday sun rays touching a stained-glass vase. The steadiness and boredom are disturbed by this circumstantial playfulness. Here and now. As my favorite teenage-years band was singing, “the good times are killing me,” and hopefully, these new bad times will make us stronger. But oh these good-old good times... Come back sooner than later. My ex-favorite band continues: “Got dirt, got air, got water, and I know you can carry on.”

“As my favorite teenage-years band was singing, “the good times are killing me,” and hopefully, these new bad times will make us stronger.”

March 25th, Wednesday, 3:32 pm

Today my friend Mike woke me up from the lethargy condition that I have been in

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and out of for the last 10 days. He introduced me to a mental vaccine of mental toughness consisting of 1gallons of water, 45 minutes of exercising outside, and 45 minutes of exercising inside, 10 pages of reading (this one is easy!), healthy eating, and no alcohol. And this has to last for 75 consecutive days. Honestly, no alcohol is the only thing that makes me hesitate. Alcohol is so central to survival in these times of depression. Also, can I even go for walks every day in Brooklyn, New York? It seems this city is becoming a hot mess.

March 26th, Thursday, 7:02 pm

Structure makes me move forward. As well as delicious meals, loyal friendships, and blossoming plants. A cozy nook in the apartment and not a dead soul around. Financial triangulations in my head. Today probably has been emotionally the best day during the quarantine. I followed that crazy routine and biked first thing in the morning, read a few pages on how to be a better listener, studied Portuguese with my professor Francisco and sat down to read and write. I think a good day for me is a productive day with self-care time and brakes for delicious home-made foods.

March 27th, Friday, 1:30 pm

The weather is pleasantly warm, and the fishy smell of the East River reminds me of holidays by the sea. Lady Liberty proudly embraces solitude while one of the few remaining ferries bypass her, keeping the appropriate distance. I submerge myself in the sun rays. Scaling in and out is what keeps me sane. When I zoom in to everyday chores, I think I can continue with the bigger picture as well.

April 1st, Wednesday 11:45 am

I talked to my mum today, as I do almost every day. Her health is not the strongest, and the slightest cough, sneeze, the ache in the chest, her numb knee, a blister on her lip worries me. Nevertheless, she always has the strength to discuss world politics and express her opinions. "Germans seem to be immortal," she shared her snarky comment referring to the ratio of the detected cases of COVID19 and the deaths there. Later, being a food technologist, she got into the spiral of venting about the footage she saw about the famous Wuhan food market. She provided me with the most detailed and thickest description of how all types of foods are thrown together. She was disgusted about the process of slaughtering animals at the same place, where they sell them. She concluded by painting a vivid picture of how you can carry home a still alive chicken from there. When she was visiting me in New York, she was complaining about the street food carts precisely the same way. In essence, none of them meet the European Union food regulation standards. What worries me when I listen to her is when is the next time I will have a chance to see her.

April 2nd, Thursday 7:03 am

Been throwing up all night. Out of blue. I did not eat anything suspicious, everyone around is comparatively healthy and managing the way through. And sometimes I wake up, have to sit in my bed for a couple of minutes until I finally realize that this is not some surreal dream and I am by myself here in New York, Brooklyn. Maybe I shouldn't have asked my roommate to leave, even though she kept the most enormous pile of clothes and uncleaned mugs and other dirty dishes in her room to the point that one could not enter it? At least I could wake up to some sort of liveliness and extra money. The last time I was throwing up like this when I was going through some uneasiness at school. Maybe this is how my body screams for

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attention to be more gentle with myself.

April 6th, Monday 5:30 pm

I had a call with my Portuguese tutor Francisco, he lives in Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, Brazil. I get live updates about what is happening in Brazil, my future fieldsite where I had to be this summer, from him twice a week. I listen to his complaints about Bolsonaro, see him migrating from his house to his parents and back, observe how his mood changes with the numbers of cases growing and new policies of seclusion being installed. His studies in marketing have been moved online, but he is happy that the language tutoring business is thriving – he says he has 10-15 classes every day. Today we were just talking since he was too exhausted. I told him about my doctoral project, about my unfulfilled expectations to start it this June, about uncertainties around it, about my research objects. I noticed his eyes lighting up when I mentioned that one of the collectives I attempt to research are spiritist mediums in Brazil. Apparently, he is one! He realized that last year, when he saw the spirit of a man who previously used to live in his parents' house hanging out in their kitchen. He agreed to help me with my research and be my informant! I think I will stop throwing up now.

April 9th, Thursday 8:30 pm

My plan was to be productive. We were supposed to have a check-in within my traineeship company. Nothing special, just having a short chat. It was supposed to happen at 2:15 pm, and I somehow thought it was 2:30 pm. Who arranges meetings starting at quarter past? When I joined, the call was almost over. Nobody missed me. I burst into tears out of nowhere and could not do anything else that day, but just think about what just happened to me. So silly. Around 6 pm, I got myself together

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and managed to get a page written.

April 12th, 2020, 9 pm

The friends that I would not talk to for months and see them only when I come back to Lithuania started to organize weekly group calls. Numerous group chats also popped up. In one of them, my friend Sandra confessed that she has cried every single night this week. Her mom passed away last year, and she really misses her. She would like to call her mom, but she cannot. There are semi-trucks full of dead bodies right down the street and ambulances going by all hours of the day. They have a hospital a mile away from their apartment in Bed Stuy. Sandra has a 3-year-old daughter. The fact that her daughter can also see that makes her even more upset.

April 14th 2020, 10 am

My friend called. The one that a few weeks ago suggested to plan a trip to Texas. Now she says she has rented a house in Mississippi by the lake. She and her husband made an executive decision and they are definitely going. I explained to her that I cannot afford any luxurious trips at the moment. She said that they will give me a generous discount. As much as this idea sounded crazy a few weeks ago, now I am starting to see myself in the deep south, sitting on the porch and sipping some sweet tea. The stickiness and humidity of the air soaking to my skin. New York is alright, and the cheerful claps every night at 7pm (today I went all in and banged some pots and pans) give hope. The daily cheer for the essential workers also provides an opportunity to greet my neighbors. The couple across the street looks very friendly. Despite this daily splash of positivity, I still feel caged. Both in my apartment and my thoughts.

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“New York is alright, and the cheerful claps every night at 7pm (today I went all in and banged some pots and pans) give hope.”

April 15th, 6pm

We are in all seriousness contemplating going to Mississippi. But can we? Shouldn't the national guard at the border stop us and send us back? Can we even cross states? Where will we sleep midway? Maybe the best idea is just to do it in one go and not to stop anywhere. Where will we stop for the bathroom? Are we endangering local communities by coming there from New York? The anthropologist inside me is actually excited to go. I can sense a lot of ethnographic material throughout this eighteen-hour journey.

April 16th, 8pm

We are definitely going. We will leave New York at 9 am. We plan to cross the states of New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama. My boyfriend has never been in the Southern states, and he is worried about the police stopping us. Nevertheless, the idea of having a different weekend from what we have before and not reliving the same day again and again just sounds incredibly appealing.

April 17th-18th, the longest days so far

We did it – we managed to reach the state of Mississippi. New York has never been easier to drive through, almost disturbingly easy. We were not stopped, we were not asked what we were doing, where we were going. The whole trip was almost too easy. ‘We are all in this together. Keep social distancing,’ said one of the signs in Pennsylvania. Virginia struck me as refreshingly green, full of picturesque valleys and peaking mountains. The bible belt states perturbed us with countless gigantic crosses, confederate flags, license plates with religious references, churches around every corner, fast food restaurants, and lots of signs. ‘Trump, 2020.’ ‘Don’t worry about the future, it has not come yet.’ ‘Trump hates fags.’ ‘If you have time to worry, you have time to pray more.’ Gas stations were empty, and we were the only ones wearing masks and gloves. We decided to treat ourselves with the southern *délicatesse* of chick-a-filet. The drive-through pickup line was long but worth the wait. The front of the car served us as a table.

The very last stop was Walmart at Lucedale, the nearest town from the place my friends rented. I have never been to a shop that was huge and empty. In comparison to New York, where lines to enter Trader Joe’s were around 3 blocks, Walmart was operating business as usual. Barely any of the shoppers were wearing masks and definitely not 100% of the staff. The middle-aged woman at the counter showered us with the southern hospitality, smile, and laughter. Although my inner barometer could not indicate the level of her genuity. When her co-worker came to chat with her, she complained about how tired she is and said she is thinking of leaving this job. “I just don’t care if you fire me,” she said, “I have shares on Amazon.”

Hans Blumenberg (1997) in his “Shipwreck with Spectator” observes that “In the field of representation, shipwreck is something like the “legitimate” result of seafaring, and a happily reached harbor or serene calm on the sea is only the deceptive face of something that is deeply problematic” (p. 9). We reached our harbor – a majestic four bedroom house near the private lake, which at night explodes from the sounds of

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frogs croaking. We found our own serenity in Mississippi, but the serenity of Mississippi Covid19-wise is almost disturbing. Social distancing is not something that is visible and tangible here. So much more is happening underneath the soil of this wetland and it is almost a pity that it is not the Covid-19 hysteria.

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April 20th, 6:08 pm

Although Mississippi has been our home for only a few full days, I keep replaying images of the distressed New York. It almost feels that I can relive my emotions more sharply. The visual of an empty Brooklyn bridge is stuck in my head. As if leaving the shipwreck of NYC, the privileged position of the insider, placed me in a better view of a remote spectator. I am enjoying a cup of my late afternoon earl grey in the porch, hiding from the intense spring sun. Yesterday I forgot to put sunscreen on, and my arms and legs burnt. How does the fact that I am in this safe harbor (where the only thing I have to worry about is my red limbs) affecting my memories about New York?

April 23rd, 9pm

We decided to stay for another week. An 18 hour trip after only a few days in this southern paradise does not seem like a fair deal. Today I cooked some pasta with shrimp, and we played cards sipping red wine. Few last days meshed into each other.

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It is not clear where they end where they begin – they are all pleasantly calm, soothing, and serene. I read books, write to my friends, swim in the lake and relax on a chaise longue in the backyard. We were supposed to have a call with our friends in New York, but I completely forgot. Completely forgot that there my friend Sandra still sees semi-trucks with dead bodies in them. It seems that the situation in New York is getting relatively better, and some states are considering opening.

April 26th, 8:30 pm

Almost every evening we go for a walk. We turn left on a barely visible path right by the entrance of the house. We walk a few hundred meters through the pine tree forest before we approach the lake. We always spot a handful of fishing boats. Today two kids, around the age of 12, are trying to park a motorboat while their dad is putting fishing equipment in the semi-truck. Then we pass a massive farm. The farm smells can be overpowering and re-route as back home, but today all we can smell is the piney odor. The sky is yellow and pink, with a scattering of puffy clouds floating here and there. On our way back, we take a different path than usual and spot a swamp and wonder whether there are any alligators leisurely reposing in the muddy waters. The bush moves, and we quicken our pace. We end up on the road, a few miles from the house. Quite a few cars pass by. A truck stops, and the lady with messy grey curly hair stops to chat: “did y’all walk all around the lake? That must have been a trek! I saw you walking down by the lake. You may have bumped into my dogs then. Where y’all from?” I tell her that we, indeed, saw her dogs and wish her a good evening. “Have a good evening, honey,” she says in the Mississippian accent and casually drives away. Life in Mississippi flows without any significant disturbance. The next day on our walk, we will see the women with messy grey curly hair passing by again. She goes fishing at the Dream Strike lake, the lake visible through my bedroom window. In the emptiness, vastness, and spaciousness of nature and self-imposed effortless social distancing, the virus cannot find its ways in Lucedale,

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Mississippi.

April 28th, 11 am

Time is slow, and my morning coffee never tasted better. The only disturbing thought is that we are going back to New York soon. An image of being trapped in a tiny apartment makes my stomach ache. And it is not only the spatial containment but the absence of movement freedom that bothers me. Even when you go outside, you feel somehow guilty for walking and even breathing. To sustain the positivity and to redirect my thoughts, I stopped reading news. Maybe the news stopped reaching me. The mal-informed president and his inane performance, fatalistic graphs, catastrophic consequences of the market's downfall to people's lives penetrate our brains like mental bugs. As Steven Pinker (2018), a Harvard professor observes, "consumers of negative news, not surprisingly, become glum. [...] misperception of risk, anxiety, lower mood levels, learned helplessness, contempt and hostility towards others, desensitization, and in some cases, [...] complete avoidance of news."

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At the beginning of the crisis, I did consume a lot of news. I would stay with my eyes wide open until 3 or 4 in the morning, and I barely ever struggle to fall asleep. Pinker (2018) aims to prove that we lack conceptual tools to ascertain whether progress on the global scale has taken place or not and that the very idea of things getting better,

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in general, does not compute. And at the moment, my brain cannot “compute” the near-future outcome of the situation. On the one hand, the scale of the matter is so vast that it is hard to speculate its movement patterns, the accuracy of the numbers, and prediction models. On the other hand, the reaction to it can be very sudden and almost unexpected. The flights from Europe were shut in one day. It took only a few days to close local businesses and pass social-distancing orders. Should we stop in Georgia on our way to New York for a nice meal? It just doesn’t sound right yet.

April 29th, 1:24 pm

It has been raining all day long, and we are trapped inside. I started to wander around and carefully investigate the objects in the house. I found “The Goldfinch,” “Kite Runner,” and “I am Malala” in my bedroom. I also spotted “Praying for Your Future Husband” and “Before You Meet Prince Charming.” This house was the first universe for Elliot, Michaela and Ethan, and Mia. Their names are inscribed at the side of my bedroom door for height measurement. At the age of 15, Elliot was higher than his sister Michaela at the age of 22. This house maintained the family through the storms of those of the heavens and those of life. There is something about the protestant humbleness of the space. The art is blending into the color of the walls. In the living room, next to the wooden clock, four decorated crosses catch my gaze. Us being here in the present, a family living here in the past and the unknown post-Covid19 future... Will, this god’s forgotten piece of land, even feel the difference after this bizarre dream ends, or will the life flow as it has been flowing?

April 30th, 2:03 pm

Some states are opening up – pictures of people drinking lattes in Georgia and going to nail salons in Alabama are fleeing the internet. New York will remain closed. How

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two weeks of Mississippian wilderness will affect the remainder of time under the quarantine conditions in the Big Apple? The destabilizing moments of numbness are what I fear the most.

I just finished listening to Masha Gessen's talk about solitude and loneliness during the pandemic. She was interviewed by Simon Critchley. I enjoyed the content of the conversation almost as much as observing these two philosophers in their ordinary home environments. It is interesting to contemplate how Zoom (which became a generic word to describe the means of remote communication), amplifies social and spatial distancing. Freezing screens, cut off sounds, ability to leave or turn off the camera at any point is part of our daily communication these days. At the same time, Zoom conferencing exposes us to intimate environments, our homes. Makeup free faces and sweatpants became the new normality. While Masha was wearing a black turtleneck and a grey blazer, Simon had a Liverpool FC training top on.

Masha explained the difference between solitude and loneliness, saying that the former is an action, while the latter is a feeling. "While solitude is a philosopher's dream and a deliberately chosen condition, loneliness can be felt amid a large crowd. Thinking happens in solitude and it requires being alone. The forced isolation, however, is the enemy of solitude – it converts to loneliness and creates conditions of losing the comfort of one's thoughts," she said. "Loneliness," stressed Masha, "is compounded with anxiety and fear. And now, philosophers, people whose job is to imagine the future are lonely. The idea that we might change the world is not self-evident. Indeed, philosophers were trying to cultivate self-isolation for years, and this should be a philosophical dream, but it isn't. The overwhelming sense that the world has emptied out is debilitating". In response to the observations concerning the intellectual life, Ann Stoler's comment popped up in the QA box: "the fact that we as academics and intellectuals in the making can't "concentrate" as we "should"-aren't able to use the privilege of this time for our own work something we can exploit feels as if we have been exposed to ourselves, that the projects we thought so

important (are perhaps not), that the “work” we so value is often an affect, that we perform for ourselves. We all did think that we would find space to advance our dissertations and manuscripts, but we got caught in the privilege and the protections that we have built around our lives.”

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The delineation of loneliness resulting from COVID and exaggerated version of isolation that was already part of our modern life is, however, thin. “When I pass a shopping mall biking, I cannot tell the difference between a closed or opened shopping mall. We see our pre-conditions exaggerated. In a crisis, we become more ourselves. Loneliness is endemic to contemporary American life,” acutely notices Masha. Indeed, sometimes I catch myself comparing how my street looked before the crisis and during it. I contemplate how I utilized these public spaces and what role they played in my life, what was home to me, and how its perception is changing through this experience.

Masha also noticed that “things just happen too quickly and become new common sense/new reality at the speed of light. We are witnessing the disappearance of society, the loss of time and space – the Arendtian totalitarian loneliness. Distance has become an abstraction. We live close to our families, but we cannot see them. So many connections are not occurring anymore. Even Trump, who thrives on masses and rallies, is destabilized.” The crowd he is continually facing (and recently has refused not to) is not his personal favorite – they are informed and seeking-for-answers journalists. “While Trump was in denial,” noticed Masha, “the country was

functioning with no disruptions. The bureaucratic machine was not malfunctioning, it worked as it was supposed to work. It is not designed to consider the possibility of failure. Nationalism has become the answer. Nationalism offers the promise of the divine and a way to break with loneliness. It is the last resort of locating yourself, a safety hub. Countries of Europe closed the borders as an automatic gesture. And that's terrifying." "We find ourselves in the Hobbesian state," responded Simon to Masha's reaction to self-isolation of the European nations.

At the very end of the talk, Simon asked whether "the pandemic can be envisioned as a portal for new possibilities. And if so, what is it a portal to?" To finish the conversation, Masha raised a few questions: "Can we think about the interconnectedness of the world without thinking about national borders? What is school for? The crisis has shown that school in modern society is for warehousing children. Do we want to warehouse our children when we return to society?"

May 2nd, 11:pm pm

It is our last day in Lucedale, Mississippi. We are leaving for New York tomorrow. Everything was perfect today. Midday corn with butter and chilli flakes, an improvised football match, even the walk during the golden hour passing the abhorrently smelling farm, a sunset yoga practice with an audience of around a dozen fisherman in the lake and an evening discussions by the hypnotizing fire reminiscing good old pre-corona days. We miss bars, saunas in the gyms, freedom just to go whatever one's eyes see and feet take. The highlight of the day, we all agree, was the face-to-face encounter of the lady we saw the other day. When we talk about her, we call her Darlene.

Darlene: "You guys are leaving tomorrow, right? You guys sure enjoy walking, the fishing isn't good today, but you guys don't like to fish anyways."

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James: "I'd like to learn to fish."

Darlene puts her fishing rod down and comes closer (closer than the recommended 6 feet): "Sorry I'm hard of hearing, you guys leaving tomorrow? Yeah, I've been fishing a lot, I used to work at the drugstore, but I quit, now I collect unemployment. I like to be surrounded by people. My husband passed away 17 years ago. In this lake, most people just put the fish back, but if I catch something, I'll take it home and cook for my kids. I know the family that used to live in that house. The kids are all grown up now and have left. There was Michaela, Ethan, Elliot, Mia, the youngest is a doctor now in California. You heard about this corona stuff? It's bad, it's horrible. We've had 14 cases in George County – that's this county. People not wearing masks and whatnot. I used to get my hair done once a week. I don't go anymore, too dangerous now."

James: "Are those your horses next door?"

Darlene: "No, those horses belong to Marty Davis. He has two kids – they ride. You better enjoy your walk now, walk on. This is the real country of America. The country. Are you guys leaving tomorrow? Have a safe trip. You must be leaving in the morning cos the cleaner will come in, next people coming in around 4."

May 3rd, 9:30 pm

Today we left Mississippi. Instead of dividing our trip into two days, we split it into three. Our goal for today was Nashville, Tennessee, and we reached it. Tennessee is one of the states that was supposed to open up, but once we were there, it did not feel like open. Maybe because we arrived in the middle of the storm. The drive for the last hour was horrifying. We could see the tops of the trees reaching the ground, and our humongous Chevrolet Equinox (appropriate for the American road trip) was sliding to the sides of the road. I sheltered inside our car, while James ran into the

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hotel we have booked for the night. He came back all drenched in rain and breathless. Our hotel lost electricity, and we had to drag our stuff upstairs via the side door. None of the staff in the hotel were wearing masks. They gave us a presidential suite (although it did not feel very presidential in a hotel of a lower budget), which indicated that there are only that many people staying. After the storm calmed down and the rain seized, we braved for a walk to downtown Nashville. We crossed the river, and the educational signs telling about the lynching history and slavery were guiding us to the center of it all. The shiny signs of the bars and music venues were intensely pulsing as if inviting people to come in, but there wasn't a soul around. The main streets, the focal veins of the city, which in normal circumstances were floating with drunken bodies and country music sounds, were apocalyptically quiet. Except Hooters was open, but nobody was inside, just a lonely host.

Out of nowhere, a bachelorette party of three with all appropriate attributes popped up. They were drinking champagne from the bottle and taking pictures. I secretly wish I had taken a photo of them. My stomach was upset with the fast-food meal from Sonic. The 1000 calorie burger just sat there, refusing to be digested. We found an ice cream shop on our way back, and a vanilla scoop on a cone and a cup of black tea helped me to feel alive again. My sugar must have dropped. The electricity in the hotel was still gone, so we dwelled in complete darkness saving batteries of our phones and computers. Instead of navigating social media, we were traversing the empty corridors of the ghost hotel and the tunnels of our minds. We were witnessing a historical moment, and Nashville revealed it in its eminence. James, being a black brit, was wrapping his head around the signs about the lynching being right to all these bars and restaurants. He found that contrast to signify the entire microcosm of America – deep traditions of country music side by side with slavery and racism. And the pandemic circumstances made that disparity to stand out even sharper.

“We were witnessing a historical moment, and
Nashville revealed it in its eminence.”

May 5th, 8 pm

We are back in the city. The sun rays wrapped the skyline of Manhattan upon our entrance through the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, connecting Staten Island and Brooklyn. The rest of the trip through Ohio and then Pennsylvania was uneventful, but scenic. The 76 highway from Pittsburgh, where we spent a night, to New York unveiled the northeastern greenery, rocky landscapes, valleys, and flats. In contrast, to the southern humidity and heat, the air was crispy and fresh. But huge signs screaming, “Trump 2020” were the same. For a few hours, we sang along the famous road trip songs – Hotel California and likes. Under the cheerfulness of our voices, one could sense an aftertaste of sweet bitterness of going back home. When I opened the door to my apartment, it looked like a dollhouse. The cheap Wayfair furniture seemed so small and comic in juxtaposition to the real and adultlike furnishings of the Mississippian lake house. The windows looked dusty, and the plants half alive. I did not plan on leaving them for that long. Smith street was busier than two and a half weeks ago. In general, on the road and the city, the atmosphere relaxed. People might be getting tired.

May 10th, 10:44 pm

Five days passed without writing, and it seems that there is not much to write about. The hot topic is opening up and the criteria we need to establish for it to happen. I find it hard to engage in discussions around this subject. First of all, I do not immerse myself in the media as I used to at the beginning of the pandemic. Secondly, I

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question the competence of the decision-makers to quantify the situation of such a scale. The examples of Germany and a few other European countries opening up and the number of instances augmenting again, seeds doubt in the perceived timeline of flattening the curve and getting back to normality. Google and American Express announced that their workers will not return to work until 2021. A hope that my fieldwork can commence in January next year is also in flux. My advisor explicitly encouraged considering an in-library version of it. The tropical dreams of Rio de Janeiro and an image of myself disembarking the shores of Brazil are being shattered. But don't I have everything I dreamed of? A bright apartment, full of plants that might as well be situated in the Copacabana neighborhood, a list of informants, plenty of time, and solitude.

May 12th, 3:31 pm

It is hard to be with myself sometimes and my mood, which tends to fluctuate like a rollercoaster, does not bring easiness. There is a possibility our lives will be like this for months and months and any intellectualization of the current state just does not feel like making it better.

May 17th, 9:54 pm

Mayor De Blasio warned New Yorkers that he would not allow for the big apple to turn into New Orleans. On Friday at 7 pm, it was still around 25 degrees when I finished my last obligation for the semester – the Portuguese exam. On my way to Greenpoint to see James and celebrate my alleged freedom, I was thinking to myself that it does not feel like quarantine any more. Cars were blasting music, and the heat, which had accumulated throughout the first hot day in the city was evaporating from the asphalt. I instantly felt elevated, and the shivers of excitement

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tiptoed my skin – this is exactly how New York summer feels. I was biking as fast as I could to soak in the breeze of the river. The sea of mouthless faces, covered with all sorts of masks, merged into the background of the invisible tunnel of motion that I was in. Dispensable blue, and minimal black masks, repurposed scarfs, and trendy ones with ornaments or floral prints. On rare occasions, when I had to stop at the red light, I kept looking around. The beehives were forming around bars with their fronts widely opened for the thirsty populace of the city. Indeed, resembling New Orleans, the Jewel of the South. It looked as if the heat had shoved people from the chambers of solitude into this communal feast. As if Dante's Alighieri's 2nd circle of hell, where souls are blown about in a violent storm, were yawning wide open, but in a positive, almost liberating and slightly inappropriate way for the given situation.

May 23rd, 4:11 pm

This week I am struggling to find motivation. My to-do list is still endless. Starting new things does not sound appealing. New York is still on the verge of remaining closed and opening up. It seems that the range of the city's closeness and openness directly correlates with the weather. I keep rewinding life decisions I took to be in this crazy city. Is New York my home? If it is, why does it feel so lonely? What makes a place home? New York has never been comfortable, but in the grimace of the pandemic living here lost its purpose.

For a second, I allowed myself to do nothing. Just relax, be ok with the messiness of the apartment, and for once leave the dishes in the sink. Prioritize writing to what I "need to do." And a refreshing wave of liberation showered me for the first time in a long time. A Buddhist Pema Chodron notices that being in the present moment and running our life story are two processes that, if practiced simultaneously, are doomed to fail. Being in this traumatic worldwide crisis is a vulnerable experience. Our bright mental images of the future are muddled with the physical existence of a

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reality that has never been part of these visions. The advice we've been given is to sweeten our experience, take a pill, to distract ourselves. How can one get in touch with all-encompassing groundlessness? How can we find tenderness in it? Buddhism teaches that the whole thinking about lasting pleasure places us in a hopeless cycle that goes round endlessly and causes us to suffer. Sticking with uncertainty, getting the knock-off relaxing amid the chaos, not panicking – this is what a spiritual path entails. At the moment when things get edgy, we can ask ourselves if we're gonna practice peace or go to war. Our journey invokes going beyond hope and fear, stepping into unknown territory, continually moving forward and growing. Buddhism teaches us to lean toward discomfort in life and see it clearly rather than protect ourselves from it. Thoughts tend to run in circles if we buy them, but really they are like dream images. They are just thinking.

We need to find love for ourselves in these times of uncertainty. It does not mean building ourselves up or painting images of how we will find happiness lasting all of our lives. It is about becoming a better person, giving up control, and letting concepts fall apart. It starts by realizing that what is happening is not the beginning nor the end and that it is a typically atypical human experience. An experience that's been happening to people from the beginning of their time. Chodron gives gentle advice to immerse ourselves in the given moment. Feel its fierceness and its heaviness. Cutting our expectations off is a gift we can give ourselves.

May 26th, 11:05 pm

Walking is a huge part of my corona life. Sometimes I feel that I flow in my thought train and my feet just carry me along. Walking opens one's system to the environment, charges the brain with new impressions, makes one's skin porous to soak in new faces, streets, gusts of wind and rays of sunshine. As Iain Sinclair puts it, walking is about "burning of neural pathways is when you've established a set of

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pathways in the head. To go somewhere new is to feel the brain is being remapped, in an interesting way. And you hope that by doing that, a new form of writing might emerge.”

“Walking is a huge part of my corona life.”

May 29th, 2:59pm, one of the first days of protests

We are pulled over by the police. James once mentioned that there is nothing else he wants to avoid in the US as a black person more than being stopped by the police. And here we are in this surreal, almost Kafkaesque, moment. We glimpse at each other, looking for confirmation in each other's faces that this is actually happening. James steers a bright white sporty Mercedes towards the right lane and stops. We open the window on the passenger side, who happens to be me.

Policeman #1: Hello, my name is This and That. We pulled you over because your speed was 90 miles per hour (James swears it could not be more than 80!), 25 miles per hour more than the allowed 65 limit. You just passed us without even slowing down a notch. Where are you heading in such a hurry?

Me: we are going to Virginia for a week of quarantine.

Policeman #1: is there a reason you were speeding up so much?

Me: hmmm... this is a rental car, and we must not be feeling it quite well yet.

Policeman #1: can you please give us your registration and insurance documents?

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James hands him a long receipt (almost Duane Reade long) from the rental company. I start viciously browsing through the documents in the compartment in front of the passenger seat. I sigh with relief in my head after I spot a rectangular piece of paper wrapped into the plastic with the word “insurance” on it. Policeman #1 also asks for both of our IDs. He heads to the car with James’ driver’s license and my passport.

Policeman #2 (pops up out of nowhere and abruptly starts interrogating): We were just wondering what the relationship between you two is? After looking at your documents, we noticed that you two are from two completely different countries. How did you meet?

Me (surprised): he is my boyfriend...

Whether it is the background noise of a freeway or my accent unusual for the Delaware locals, he leans in (not wearing a mask) looking confused. He asks to repeat what I just said. James has to shout that we are dating and that we met through a company that we used to work together. While we are trying to lay out the history of our friendship, he keeps suspiciously glancing at the back seat.

Policeman #2: What is in that jar with the green substance at the back seat?

We both look at each other and smile.

James and Vaida in unison: a smoothie!

I explain to the policeman #2 that I prepared smoothies for the trip and that we just drank them.

Policeman #2: are there any other substances in the vehicle that we should know about?

James and Vaida in consonance: nope, nothing.

Policeman #2 also asks about what we are doing in this country. James explains that we live here, and both have visas. I jump in, telling him that I am on a student visa. Policemen #2 seems to be intrigued by my studies. He asks to name the university as well as the program I am in. Finally, he walks away. We patiently wait, I also snap at James and ask not to answer questions instead of me next time.

We see policeman #2 through our side mirrors approaching again.

Policeman #2: do you, by any chance, have any documents indicating your addresses?

Vaida: I actually happen to have a few bills in my backpack since I intended to pay them during this trip. Here you go – my electricity bill.

James (no wonder!) does not happen to have a bill with him, so the policeman #2 has to write down his address on the envelope issued by Con Edison. The officer leaves again and comes back with a ticket. Policemen #2 underscores that this time they reduced our speed to 80 miles per hour and wishes us safe travels. The ticket states:

“State of Delaware

Uniform Complaint and Summons

The undersigned, being duly sworn, upon his oath, deposes and says

On 5/29/2020 at 1459

Name: James X

Address: X, Brooklyn

Sex: Male, Race: Black, Ethnic Origin: Non-hispanic

Violations: Speeding in Excess of Posted Limits”

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We keep silent for a while. Both re-running this conversation in our heads. Why were they interested in our relationship? I half-joking half-serious ask James whether they thought that he kidnapped me or something.

May 30th, 8 pm

This quote from New York Times, sums it all: "The symbolism of a billionaire-owned, for-profit space company launching astronauts high above the heads of thousands of people protesting state brutality and oppression amid a global pandemic and economic collapse should not be lost on anyone."

June 1st, 11:28 pm

Today, on the sixth day of protests, I cried and cried and cried. At one point, I felt vulnerable and so microscopic in the turn of events. I snapped at James again. As the day unfolded, I kept providing him "feedback" on how his behavior can improve. I was lost in my feelings, bursts of emotions. I could no longer draw a boundary between the inner and outer triggers of the deep sadness tearing my body, incapacitating it to concentrate on daily chores. My chest area was aching with grief and sorrow. The president has finally got out of the bunker. He did not acknowledge systemic racism. He did not talk about necessary structural changes, about dissected America, about misery and ingrained hierarchies that blasted the long-overdue abscess of societal pus. I cried for lost lives, for people marching, for women, for inequality, for essential workers, for humanity. We joined the protest here in Virginia yesterday, but today I felt like crying is my only option. Corona, the only way you are still visible is the sea of black masks. Who would have thought that wearing or refusing to put on a mask would have become a political act? We wear them to stop the virus, but the masks cannot mute the voices of the unheard.

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June 15th, 7:23 pm

We meet friends in parks and go to each other's houses. We drink margaritas on the streets, chomping on our burritos. We sit silently in Mccarren park, listening to street-taught preachers unlatching their souls on their race-related experiences. We fight, we leave, and we get back together stronger than ever. We are so hungover from too many margaritas, and from what is happening around us that we cannot force our numb bodies to rise until noon. We dread for the L.G.B.T.Q community, and we hope that some sanity still exists in this country. We want to escape home, but we don't know if we can come back as easily as before. And yet we are still gonna do that. We are dignified of how relentless this city is. We stand together for black trans lives.

June 21st, 8:44 pm

"The contradiction consists in this: what the spectator enjoys is not the sublimity of the objects his theory opens up for him, but his own self-consciousness, over against the whirl of atoms out of which everything that he observes is constituted including himself." I intended this diary to be about the world, but it turned out to be a snapshot of my consciousness. And my consciousness today is content – Tik Tokers allegedly have sabotaged Trump's rally. I would like to believe that people were just mindful of the pandemic and deliberately did not show up. On the other hand, an idea of organized political action amongst the younger generation via social means is somehow comforting.

June 22nd, 9:10 am

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The city is going crazy. Yesterday my friend Asta, who resides in Harlem, sent me a minute-long recording of fireworks blasting in the neighborhood. “During the day neighbors are partying and when it gets quieter, the fireworks start. During the work week, constructions are going on. No silence at all. Thus, I am so tense,” she wrote. Twitter is blasting with tweets that the semi-professional firework shows all over New York skies have coincided with the protests and are being used to unsettle communities of color.

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