Lee Brando

“This pandemic has shattered some of my territorial, political, and habitual boundaries.”

New York City, 13 March – 25 May 2020

I am a second year PhD student in anthropology at the New School for Social Research in New York City. My research interest is in pain and telehealth, situated in the Northwestern United States region. Ironically, my fieldwork for this summer was supposed to be in Seattle (the first U.S. epicenter for COVID-19). I have also worked as a public high school history teacher for the past 12 years. And, since mid-March I have been teaching remotely. I live in downtown Brooklyn, within a seven building cooperative complex, which is a community amidst the bustle of urban life comprising the seat of municipal government, the main borough post office, many courthouses, a couple of college campuses, a multitude of small businesses, and greenspace within Cadman Plaza and Brooklyn Bridge Parks. I share a 68 square meter apartment with my wife (Tara), dog (Lucy), and three cats (Biscuits, Cole, and “Baby Cat”). My building complex is poised between the Brooklyn and Manhattan Bridges, which is usually percolating with throngs of tourists and transit between the boroughs; however, it has recently become deafeningly quiet except for the intermittent, piercing sound of sirens.

Friday 3.13.2020[1],[2]

Today I awoke earlier than usual and equivocated about whether I should go into work. Even standing on the subway platform I was wondering whether I should turn around, go home, and self quarantine. For the past week and a half my throat has felt *scratchy*. For a short period this morning, I had a dry cough; and, asked myself, as I had numerous times this week, “Is this it?” Because I do not have a functioning

thermometer at home, I (like other colleagues) went to the nurse twice this week for a temperature check. Since it has been normal, I have continued going to work. However, working in a building with 4,000 people is making me extremely anxious. Such concern had me send a student to the nurse yesterday since he had a cough for three days this week. Last night I read a flurry of emails from colleagues calling for a sick-out next week. Therefore, I have decided to take off Monday and give my body some time to decide whether I have covid 19. But I pushed on past the platform to work and covered two classes for colleagues who were out. Today I prepared for my absence on Monday and I prayed, secularly, that I am not infected or a carrier of the virus.

Sunday 3.15.2020

After a weekend of emails and news reports, it seems that the mayor is closing the NYC public schools. A few of my colleagues published opinion pieces in *The New York Post* and *The New York Times* calling on him to do so by providing both policy recommendations and essentially shaming him. It seems that although tomorrow we are collectively not reporting to work, faculty need to receive training on distance learning Tuesday through Thursday, which seems to defeat the purpose of closing the schools. Right now, I will be pleased with this progress and be concerned about the details at a later point.

Monday 3.16.2020

I have not felt this well rested in — I cannot remember when. This weekend I did not do any work. A luxury afforded by spring break and the looming threat of the end-of-days. Studying for my Spanish language exam was shelved for a couple of days alongside lesson planning. Last week was so exhausting having the dilemma of going

into a building filled with people and not knowing whether others or myself is carrying the virus. Every movement I made required my attention and consideration. Where my body was proxemically, abstaining from touching my face, washing my hands continually… the constant vigilance of what is happening inside and outside my body has been draining. To avoid such dilemmas of countenance I decided that I will work from home this week because it is not worth the risk of contracting covid for the sake of distance learning training. This could easily be done remotely.

Friday 3.20.2020

In the six years that I've lived in my apartment, I have had relatively minimal interactions with my direct neighbors across the hall. We attended a roofdeck party together once and occasionally commeriseated about the miserable state of politics while taking the elevator. However, I often forgot their names and had to reach deep into the recesses of my mind to summon them upon seeing them in passing. But last night, after Tara and I returned from walking the dog — one of the few times we escaped the confines of our one-bedroom apartment — our neighbor rang our bell shortly after our return. We had just seen her in the hallway and exchanged greetings. She asked if she could come in because her husband had locked her out. Tara and I hesitantly agreed. My hesitance was because this seemed to violate social distancing measures and Diane[3] appears to be in a vulnerable group, likely being above 60 years old and having underlying conditions (another neighbor told me she has cancer). Diane walks and talks very slowly, she is always wearing layers of clothing even when it is warm, and her incontinence is sometimes evident from the smell in the hallway. Admittedly, part of my reluctance to invite her in was because Tara and I were about to eat dinner and I also felt socially awkward over this irregular situation before us. In spite of that, Diane came in and sat down and we had a strained conversation for about an hour before Tara suggested that she call her husband. She borrowed Tara's phone and upon her using it I thought that we must

swab that with alcohol when she leaves. Harry,[4] her husband did not answer so she left a message and said that Harry was probably sleeping. After another few minutes passed, we asked Diane if she cared to join us for dinner. She declined because she said she had IBS and said she found that skipping one meal a day helps that condition. At that point, Tara went toward the kitchen to cook and when out of Diane's view signaled rather vigorously to me that I should knock on their door. I went into the kitchen to mime a conversation with Tara to check if that was a good idea given that Diane did not want me to knock on the door. Tara confirmed that she wished for me to do so, so I did. Harry answered the door and I told him Diane was with us. We exchanged some awkward conversation about the effectiveness of bleach versus alcohol for killing germs and there was an understanding that Diane would return home. When I came back into my apartment Diane was looking at pictures in our hallway and commenting that she liked seeing other people's apartments. She seemed reluctant to leave and both Tara and I were impatiently waiting for her departure. After she left, we both exchanged expressions of *wasn't that crazy* to one another. However, it was not two minutes before our doorbell rang again. I answered it and Diane was there returning the half bottle of rubbing alcohol I gave her since she said she didn't have any. Both the bottle and her hands smelled of bleach, which made me wonder if Harry had forced her to put bleach on her hands. I accepted the returned alcohol, wondering why they couldn't just keep it. Tara and I had our dinner, incredulous about last night's occurrence, and debating which one of us will now need to return the sunglasses and paper Diane left behind. It looks like it's going to be me.

Saturday 3.21.2020

We had a repeat of Thursday evening last night. When I returned from walking Lucy at 11:00 pm, Diane was standing in front of her door. I asked her if Harry locked her out again and she confirmed that. I asked her if she wanted me to call the police,

knock on her door, or if she wished to come into our apartment. She responded in the negative to all three. She explained that Harry wished for her to get into a cab and go to her brother's house on Long Island. Harry found her brother's number and gave it to her. Diane then came into our apartment and used Tara's phone again to call her brother. It seemed odd to me that from the side of the conversation I heard appeared to lack some question on the part of Diane's brother about the oddity of this scenario. However, I just proceeded to knock on my neighbor's door. Harry looked out of the peephole and then opened his door. I explained that Diane was in our apartment again. He sheepishly told me that she "violated the quarantine." I asked if he was sick and he replied that he wasn't. So I told him that we are not under quarantine and we may go out permitted that we remain six feet away from others. He said that he is imposing a quarantine. At this point, I thought he was paranoid and cruel and I told him that Diane called her brother. We would call a car service to take her to her brother's but she needed her phone, her medications, change of clothes, etc. (and that it was 11 pm at night... and in my tone conveyed *for christ sake you don't fucking lock your seriously ill wife out of the house and have her take a cab without a phone to Long Island*). Harry gathered up some items. He gave me a phone without a sim card and said he could not find her phone. Tara called car service and we put her in a cab. Our doorman told us after the car service pulled away from the curb that this incident was not an aberration. Harry often has Diane waiting for him in the lobby when he is out seeing his girlfriend. One time she had soiled her incontinence brief and was sitting in the lobby waiting for him to return. Therefore, when Tara and I returned to our apartment I called the 84th precinct and left a message with the domestic violence unit.

Monday 3.23.2020

The DOE has begun distance learning today and my colleagues are driving me slightly insane with the flood of questions about the minutiae of technology and

pedagogy. I do not need to know the thought process of every faculty member and how they are running their classes online. I have ramped up platforms I already use and so far this seems to be working. I also resumed Spanish translation — which is tedious and makes me somewhat cranky. I feel held captive more by this schedule to finish the article than by the imperative to stay away from others. In fact, if there weren't the threat of impending death from the pandemic, this would be lovely. I no longer awake at 5:45 am and eat dinner and go to bed at a time that children do. And, it is finally quiet enough to think in NYC!

I also called Adult Protective Services today to report Harry. Another neighbor and friend, who is a social worker, encouraged me to do so and provided the telephone number. I also informed our complex manager. It seems that my time at home has made me more involved in the activities that I usually neglect or do not see. I have increased contact with family, friends, neighbors through videochat, telephone, text, and email. Ironically, I am feeling a bit overwhelmed with all the socialization and the pressure to check in on people. However, I am viewing it as a social responsibility since I am privileged enough to work from home.

Tuesday 3.24.2020

One of the headlines from today's *New York Times* is about domestic violence and the pandemic. It was eerie to read, "Another woman was being forced to choose between work and home. "He threatened to throw me out…[h]e said if I started coughing, he was throwing me out in the street and that I could die alone in a hospital room."[5] My engagement with the news is typically less immediate, which is a privilege I am afforded having a safe space to live, to work, and attend school. This pandemic has shattered some of my territorial, political, and habitual boundaries. The incident with Diane and Harry places domestic violence inside of my home.

Lee Brando

"This pandemic has shattered some of my territorial, political, and habitual boundaries."

Wednesday 3.25.2020

Last week was a bit strange as I began to establish new routines in this digital landscape. My dog and the need for groceries occasionally draw me out of my 734 square foot box on the 16th floor. But this week has seen a decided acceleration in my activity, as colleagues, friends, and family have adapted to life online. Today, I had three zoom meet-ups. As one of those was about to begin, an officer from the domestic violence unit returned my call from the message I left Friday night with the 84th precinct. I was hesitant to take it, but decided to, because if it took several days for them to get back to me and I was uncertain I would get this chance again. Plus, the call to APS was unsatisfying, in that they didn't make a "report." So this seemed like the opportunity to get something done (whatever that may mean). I gave the DV officer a narrative of events from Thursday and Friday concerning Diane. I was a bit ashamed because she had asked me questions, like "where is Diane now?" And, I had no idea even though Diane had accidentally (ostensibly) left her brother's contact information behind. I provided the contact information to Officer B. and later she left a message on my phone. Since I had been in a zoom meet-up I didn't hear it. She suggested that I call Diane's brother. So I asked Tara to do it since I was busy. Tara informed me that according to Diane's sister-in-law, Diane has been back home since Sunday and her sister-in-law requested that we should call her again if Diane is ever locked out. As well, Officer B suggested I call APS again and place a request for aide services for Diane since she would qualify. She added that Diane had part of her

brain removed a few years ago. I will follow up with this suggestion tomorrow.

Saturday 3.28.2020

Tara and I received a text that her aunt, a nurse at a pediatrician's office, has tested positive for COVID-19. We just got off the phone with her and she said that her symptoms are mild and that the next few days will determine the trajectory of the illness. Tara's cousin may also have it since she's been having dinner every night with her mom (in spite of the social distancing guidelines…grrr….).

Monday 3.30.2020

It's 8:30 am and my lazy cats have just ambled over to eat the food I put down for them. My dog and Tara are still sleeping. I love the quiet of the morning and the quiet is even quieter now and the mornings are even longer. I have hours to myself to address items on my list before having to negotiate my time. This is a novelty to me — or rather something I haven't had in a while. The schedule for when I eat, urinate, and sleep on weekdays is usually tightly structured and choreographed to maximize my efficiency, energy, and motivation. I feel guilty for enjoying the relative freedom while being isolated inside under rules of social distance and I wonder if this feeling will continue. Admittedly, this weekend's continual rainy weather did wear on my spirits and I did experience boredom last evening for the first time. But the quietude of this morning to think, read, reflect without dealing with a typical day filled with throngs of students and faculty has been pleasant.

Postscript to last week's APS note: I made contact with APS and provided Diane's information for her to hopefully get a home health aide. I have not seen or heard Diane or Harry but that has been my usual experience over the last 6+ years.

At 9:30 am APS called me again to say that Diane was not picking up her phone. I offered to knock on her door, but the caller suggested she would try in an hour.

4:11 pm

There are a couple of significant things I have left out likely due to self censoring from an embodied vestige of my Catholic upbringing. The first is more of a confession (another latent holdover). I have been watching an incredible amount of television in the evenings. I am concerned that my brain may rot as a result of this pandemic. The other is that I have been very concerned about my dad. I have called him at least once daily. He is immunocompromised both because of his age and because he is currently undergoing treatment for non hodgkin's lymphoma. I am trying to just text him today because I think that my surveillance of him is annoying him (and it's a bit onerous for me as well). Like many in his age group, it takes him on average two to three hours to respond to text messages. He has not completely embraced digital communication.

Wednesday 4.1.2020 8:31 am

I logged in my attendance this morning to virtually "move my card." It's a reminder to us Department of Education drones that we are being watched and we are not trusted. I had reached a low point last night when I reflected on the implications of this pandemic on my work situation. I should be considering myself fortunate to have a stable job — and I do. I derive a paycheck that affords me a decent life — but it is a lackluster experience. As I prepare work for students I feel like a fraud. I am charged with teaching them a type of Whig history, which is difficult to get excited about. With some students there is a great disparity between their enthusiasm of the subject matter and my own, which intensifies my guilt. Occasionally, I peel off into

something that I find interesting, regarding law and medicine, and I look out to a sea of confused faces. So I return to the same tired questions that teachers have asked for decades, “Should the U.S. have entered WWII before being attacked?” And, I cringe because it’s a stupid question. The framing could be changed for something more philosophically engaging, but that would veer too far from the curriculum and propaganda I am charged with inculcating in these poor students. I often tell them that they will get a much more exciting education after high school. However, in teaching an undergrad class this semester I find that students are so weighed down with coursework and jobs that they cannot properly prepare for class. Student participation does not reach the expectations that I had and I have made several interventions to offset this (e.g. teaching students how to navigate an academic text). The current situation with remote learning has intensified the engagement problem. I am trying yet another strategy this week: hybrid synchronous Monday meeting and asynchronous Wednesday discussion forum. I will assess and adapt…

Last evening I received another email from the University of Washington indicating that they are deferring consideration of observation requests until June 1. I have partially accepted that I will be doing digital fieldwork this summer (if that is even possible). Additionally, a discussion with Tara about how devastating this will be to the university made me morose. We were discussing the work implications of the pandemic and a recession/depression. We are already seeing the effects. The governor has taken the DOE staff Spring Break away. We will be repurposed to perform “family service and support.” This “special week” is yet to be determined. I hope that it is something useful and well organized (however having worked for the DOE now for 12 years, I am not counting on it). Governor Cuomo is also pushing through his austerity budget for CUNY funding (something that he wished to do before but now has the excuse to do it). Tara and I pondered whether we’d lose our jobs. I raised the question of whether I will be denied the sabbatical I have been saving for fieldwork.

We were on the precipice of moving to Jersey City from Brooklyn. The cost of living here is becoming unbearable. And, I need a designated office space to write. We had found a place but lost it — luckily! We could never afford two mortgages! Selling this coop, in the best market, would take three months. Now, who knows...and we will likely need to stay here and wait out whatever is to come for however long.

I feel suspended in uncertainty — the looming threat of unpleasant or maybe even horrific events to come — is unsettling because I cannot readjust to a known otherwise. I can only imagine and mentally prepare for a best/worst case scenario. We are in limbo for an unspecified amount of time. It is indeed a PAUSE, like the state executive order issued on March 20.[6] Therefore, I will continue to ask my students stupid questions. It is a distraction: we are at least *doing* something in nothingness of untethered purpose.

"I feel suspended in uncertainty — the looming threat of unpleasant or maybe even horrific events to come — is unsettling because I cannot readjust to a known otherwise."

Thursday 4.2.2020

I attribute my rather negative outlook yesterday to a series of consecutive days spent in my apartment. I remedied this mental state with a walk in the park. I will soon capitalize on the partly sunny day today for another opportunity for fresh air, albeit one with my new homemade mask (as per CDC recommendations).

The other intervention I am trying to make is trying to pin down some stable elements during this time of shifting sands. During my zoom faculty meeting yesterday, I expressed my opinion that I am trying to provide students with enough work to provide a sense of continuity but not so much to add additional stress. One of my strong students has stopped doing work this week and I will need to inquire about what is happening. While walking my dog last night, I ran into a neighbor whom I haven't seen. She had said she is finally recovering from COVID-19 and is allowed out after a two week quarantine. I felt horribly for keeping an even wider space than six feet between us and not riding the elevator with her, even though she was wearing a mask, but Tara's asthma puts her in a high risk group. This morning as I listened to NPR, I heard that hospitals have put triage plans in place for covid; there is a scoring system. And, even with that, ventilators have only deferred the inevitable with a mortality rate of 50% on ventilators and 50% not being able to be extubated.

Friday 4.3.2020

Just as I am feeling rather low about my job, I am uplifted by the extraordinary research proposals I am receiving from my freshman. These 13 and 14 year old students have presented an array of really insightful paper topics. Of course, not all of them, but so far I am overwhelmed by the thought, care, and critical thinking that has been applied to their proposals. And, I am actually excited to read some of their papers in June. I need to be sure to tell them how pleased I am. I think sometimes I am a bit too hard on them. Now, more than before, they need to hear it.

When this plague abates, I should think seriously about proposing to teach a research-based class. However, only if I do not need to take it as a third prep. And, maybe in lieu of U.S. History and Government. Having taught that now five years consecutively, I think I am about to lose my mind.

Lee Brando

Saturday 4.4.2020

I begin to prepare for my day as another task has made its way onto my list — that is doing work with my soon to be 7-year old niece via Skype. Yesterday I received a frantic text from my sister that her children, particularly Sophie,[7] were not being productive. So in spite of being up to my elbows in grading and dealing with a student situation for the university course, I offered to Skype to help her with math homework. This was not the best tutoring session ever, but given the dire circumstances of learning from home, she was able to complete a couple of pages of subtraction. I praised her for her work and we made a promise to work on reading together today.

In our couple's therapy session last evening Tara and I were discussing the psychological effects of this pandemic. It has taken its toll on us differently. For her, the social distancing has been far more onerous. And, my constant presence at home has disrupted her schedule. Although, I would argue that my presence at home has motivated her to at least do more yoga (if not only to escape being in the same room as me). The quiet is disturbing to her. For me, it is quite the opposite. Quiet allows me to think. However, my time is not filled with the things that I necessarily want to do. My research and my graduate life (save for teaching New School students remotely) is effectively on PAUSE. There is so much uncertainty surrounding my field site. My plans to go to Seattle this summer — the original epicenter in the U.S. are likely dashed.

"My research and my graduate life (save for teaching New School students remotely)

Lee Brando

is effectively on PAUSE.”

One of the roles that I identified in therapy last evening is the social support that we provide to each other. Our lives and livelihoods may be placed on PAUSE at the moment (and for who knows how long) but we have a social responsibility to adhere to orders for social distancing and hygiene, policies, and guidelines. We also should help each other out as much as possible. I try to keep things together, so I can help other people in my life. In my finer moments I accept this task. However, my acceptance is likely predicated on the hope that I will be able to resume life as it once was at some point in the not so distant future. In my darker moments, there is a void, where the joy that once were my research plans were located.

Monday 4.6.2020

Last night I had a dream that was both comforting and disturbing at the same time. It comprised two key figures from my research and work life. The setting was Seattle and the director of the site where I was given access was allowing me to go ahead to continue. However, his lax attitude about covid transmission made me anxious. He was not wearing a mask. I questioned whether transmission was still a threat. The scene moved to include my boss where I was moving within a space deemed contaminated. I had to be there for some reason. My supervisor entered the area and then there was a whirl of odd scenarios. One that I could tease out and remember is that she sent me on some errand to get items from the drying machine (this may be a holdover from my doing laundry yesterday or something related to the hygenic ritual practices of washing). I imagine that the dream represented my fatigue over the rituals of disinfecting and mask wearing. I went to bed last night worried that I did not wash my hands long enough when returning from walking the dog. And, this

morning I woke to the news that a tiger has contracted covid.

I honestly despise wearing a face mask outside and whenever I am far away enough from people I move it to around my neck. It is difficult to breathe with a mask on my face. There is no feeling of fresh air and my vision is also occluded. So the walks outside on a lovely sunny day are now dampened by protective gear...I understand why, the sirens outside my window remind me. They are symbols of the morbidity and mortality statistics that we read daily on a local, national, and global level.

"I honestly despise wearing a face mask outside and whenever I am far away enough from people I move it to around my neck."

Tuesday 4.7.2020

After a long day, I returned a call to my uncle. He seems to be doing well and has shared this good fortune by increasing his typical level of generosity to others by delivering food to his parish priest and sending games in the mail to his great nieces and nephew. He also called my dad to check on him and offer support. My uncle and I usually do not have much to talk about; however, covid and its social impact has bridged the divide. Even when he praised Trump, I bristled a little less than usual, instead marveling at how his supporters could interpret such gross irresponsible governance in the midst of a bungled crisis as good leadership. Admittedly, I had to hold the phone away from my ear for part of this extollation, and I refocused my thoughts on the aspects of my uncle which are community-oriented.

In a similar political vein, yesterday the world found out that Boris Johnson was admitted to the ICU. I am trying to muster the same generosity of spirit for him as I do my uncle. While I do not want Boris Johnson to die (although I can imagine many Britons do)...I cannot help but to ask, why the hell hasn't Trump fallen ill?

Friday 4.10.2020

I spent a good deal of time getting my mom connected via zoom this week. As many are preparing for holidays via videoconference,[8] I find that I have become the de facto family tech support. Helping my mom is maddening because she uses an android tablet and phone and she is afraid to troubleshoot. She treats experimenting with technological devices as if a wrong move will launch a nuclear missile. After about an hour, we are finally able to get her audio working on zoom. A few hours later, my best friend calls to tell me the Seder book she scanned is unreadable by one of her brothers. I told her that it was because she did a haphazard job of scanning the book. But even still, it's readable to me. I suggested that her brother right click on each page and print the 23 pages individually or have his 21 year-old daughter figure it out...I told my wife that she has to deal with getting her parents on zoom for Easter. Usually, I am the tech person for them, but my patience is exhausted. Plus I really am growing to dislike video conferencing.

In covid news, the NY area is seeing a "flattening of the curve," while we experienced the highest records of mortality on Tuesday and Wednesday. The New York Times reported on Wednesday how inept our state and local government was in intervening early[9] to reduce morbidity and mortality. In the last two press conferences that Governor Andrew Cuomo has given (who has become a hero in the state because he is enormously more competent compared to Donald Trump on a federal level and Mayor Bill DeBlasio on a local level), he underlines the point that the government has done everything it could to save lives. Those of us who remain

critical do not believe this line of bullshit. I recall the last week I was physically present at work feeling dangerously exposed and angry that schools were not shuttered. And, according to Dr. Thomas Frieden, for director of the CDC and former commissioner of NYC's health department, "if the state and city had adopted widespread social-distancing measures a week or two earlier, including closing schools, stores and restaurants, then the estimated death toll from the outbreak might have been reduced by 50 to 80 percent."[10] Rather New York's stay-at-home order came behind other states and cities on March 20 and went into effect March 22. The governor blames the resistance he received from the federal government, which I can believe — we all watched, heard, read Trump's minimizing of the virus's gravity and overstating the government's handle on it, only to be reversed shortly afterwards when clear evidence proved him wrong. However, that is Trump's modus operandi — one in which his followers ride along with.

Tuesday 4.14.2020

After teaching last evening via zoom, I decided to call my colleague friend who had a presumptive case of covid. From her description of her symptoms, it seemed relatively bad, lasting now over a month. She hadn't responded to my text from Sunday, which is unusual for her. However, since it was Easter, I assumed she might be doing Easter activities with her son. But since another full day went by, I decided to call her and when she didn't answer her phone, I became slightly concerned. What prompted this worry was another friend texting to inform me that 21 teachers in the DOE had died from covid. Some rather grim thoughts crossed my mind as I tried to calm them. In a reflex behavior, I played with my phone and opened my email and one of them was from Elaine.[11] I could see immediately that it was lengthy and about union organizing. I took a deep exhalation of breath and now understood why she didn't get back to me. I texted her to tell her to ignore my voicemail that I now understood that she was occupied. Elaine texted back to explain that she gets easily

exhausted and she cannot do too much these days. I replied and told her that her email was compelling.

A while later she texted me again to express frustration that a few people had emailed her to say something similar, but that only two people replied in a thread and she felt that their responses shut down a broader discussion about filing a grievance for their negligence, in the way that the Department of Education was slow to close the public schools and then require teachers to physically come in for three days after it was closed to students for remote learning training. I'm unsure exactly what a "grievance" is but essentially it would ask for a reinstatement of Cumulative Absence Reserve (CAR) days for teachers who had taken time during those two weeks to reduce their risk or because they were caring for a sick family member. I suppose I would fit into the former category. During the three day week that teachers were asked to report for the sake of professional development for remote learning, I had decided that the risk of physically reporting to work for three days was unnecessary since I could easily plan for remote learning, remotely…

While I am personally fine with giving over three days in my rather large reserve (I think I have over 50 days), there are some teachers who did not have that time (either mothers who took maternity leave or people who suffered long term illnesses). Furthermore, a strong show of solidarity with our United Federation of Teachers, helps to raise the power of unions and labor in general. This is especially important at a time when non unionized workers are losing their jobs and endemic exploitation of workers is intensely worse during the pandemic. Elaine had expressed this (and much more) in her persuasive email.

During our text exchange — which lasted at least an hour, I had stated that I was on board with an action that sent a clear message to the local government. However, I was unsure that a "grievance," which had to be made to our principal and may have implications for him was the correct course of action. It has been clear that he has been engaged and working on behalf of teachers from the start. Additionally, Elaine

could not assure me that a grievance would not have a negative impact for him. Rather she argued that it should not matter because of the greater good. I said that it did matter to me and that it likely matters for other teachers (which is possibly why her email did not open up more conversation). And, I suggested that we consider another action that does not use our principal as a human shield. Alternatively, we should devise a mechanism to express our dissent with our local government and maybe also petition for CAR reimbursement. She challenged me to envision something. And, I suggested we should use our political power to insure that deBlasio's political career is over. Practically that may mean continued editorials to local papers.[12] Maybe we could take up a collection of donations and begin providing aid to teachers' and students' families in the name of "those fallen as a result of DOE ineptitude during a time of crisis." These aid packages could serve as both material support while shaming our mayor. I also suggested we start a super PAC for progressive candidates. Thanks to *Citizens United v. FEC* we could actually do something like that.

Elaine was unimpressed with my suggestions. And, I would agree that these were ad hoc and not well planned. However, she did take seriously my concern about the unintended negative consequences that may fall upon our principal. Therefore, she is exploring another avenue for grieving CAR days.

Needless to say, this left me, at close to midnight, in a state of being rather disturbed. My own dilemma about feeling like a politically moderate sell out, who is unwilling to take bold action. I have grappled with this many times before — last night's text session brought these anxieties to the fore and made for some restless sleep.

> "My own dilemma about feeling like a

politically moderate sell out, who is unwilling to take bold action.”

Wednesday 4.15

It’s tax day! I see that both NYS Dept. of Finance and the IRS have already been into my bank account. Typically, I would happily pay taxes as part of my duty as a person who benefits from the social services provided to us all. But I’m even more upset with the U.S. government this morning than usual. Instead of taking responsibility for a slow and bungled response to covid, Trump has (in his typical way) deflected criticism of the WHO. He is suspending funding while there is an investigation of their handling of covid. This decision comes on the heels of his “tantrum”[13] for his mismanagement of the pandemic, particularly in getting needed resources to states, like NY, effectively. These uncertain and rather frightening times are more intensely so with Trump making such unhinged decisions. One would think that such a maneuver would get him removed from office or at least not elected. However, this is political theater that plays to his base, who are both wary of international organizations and have a penchant for conspiracy.

12:52 pm

As I waited for my lunch to cook, I wanted to add that last evening I discovered a gift outside my door. It was a bottle of wine. Inside the card, there is a $20 bill. The card reads, “Thank you so much! Diane and Harry (Virus free).” Ostensibly the $20 is the money I lent to Diane on the night we put her into car service to her brother’s. But the bottle of wine and card of thanks from the both of them are curious. What are we being thanked for, being a decent neighbor to Diane? Calling the police on Harry?

That strange situation became even stranger with this gift… although maybe I should just take it as a general kind act and leave the analysis aside. Hopefully, Diane is getting some help through APS.

Friday 4.17.2020

In this time of social distancing I ironically feel closer to people's lives and theirs to mine — for better and for worse. Since I have had a more flexible schedule. I have been more "present" at home — doing more housework and spending more time paying attention to everyone. That has improved my relationship with my partner. Also, the volume of communication with friends and family is off the charts. I call to check in on the older members of my family more. My parents and sister text with me constantly throughout the day to provide updates on their every move in their respective spaces. My uncle sends me photos and videos. My mom and other uncle forward emails. My friend calls me during the middle of the day to ask if I would take care of her three cats if she fell ill. Friends and family want to zoom. Finally, I have become more involved in situations that I would have normally ignored. Of course, there is a positive side to this. In some ways, I am the human that I should be but have chosen not to because I'm busy or too tired to deal with the emotional messiness that comes with deep relationships. But on the other hand, I feel that my boundaries that, in some cases, I worked hard to establish, are being transgressed (somewhat my own fault). Everyone knows where to reach me… I am home — always! At least at work I can hide in the staircase and read or find an empty classroom. Pre-COVID I have also hidden from my wife in the staircase of our building, went to a friend's apartment while it was empty, or even hid in the bathroom to get some work done. I have dodged family get-togethers taking courses over the summer in Poland or fieldwork in Seattle. But now I am here — the digital network has permeated the walls of my apartment.

Lee Brando

> “In this time of social distancing I ironically feel closer to people’s lives and theirs to mine — for better and for worse.”

Tuesday 4.21.2020

As I read about conditions improving, slightly fewer COVID-related deaths and hospital admissions in New York City, I am hearing about cases within my wider social network. The cases are from outside of the center of New York City, which is consistent with what is being reported regarding the suburbs cresting after the city. This disparity is corroborated by my anecdotal conversations with health care workers that I know. My mother-in-law’s nursing home in Queens (the borough in NYC hardest hit by COVID, where she is the director of nursing) has seen fewer patients going to the hospital and dying this week. However, my cousin, a nurse working in a small Nassau County hospital, is seeing the same steading stream of five COVID admissions a day. And, she indicated there are still PPE shortages; they are not receiving N95 masks (but another type of hospital grade mask).

My close friend told me on Saturday evening, when we spoke, that her uncle had died from COVID. He lived on Long Island, possibly Suffolk County. Last night, after teaching my seminar, I received a text from my mom indicating that my brother-in-law’s colleague (whom he is in close contact with) tested positive. He is an essential worker, working for Metro North. My patience was a bit short — unsure if that was because it was a long day or I am burnt out from constantly fielding problems in my sister’s life… but my texts were a bit clipped: practical and less emotional. My advice was that he needs to self-quarantine. He suggested living in his basement, away from

his family for two weeks, is the course of action that is recommended. I'm sure that my sister is displeased with that since she will now have to wrangle her four children alone. I do not envy people with small children; I imagine this isolation is much more stressful having to manage their psychological, emotional, and physical needs on top of one's own.

Thursday 4.23.2020

My very dear friend has been vomiting all morning and has muscle aches and pain in the area of her left kidney. I was called by a mutual friend and asked to check in on her but not indicate that I heard that from her. I was told to wait before calling because my friend was apparently vomiting now. So as I waited, passing the time by grading, I received a phone call from Leslie.[14] She called to thank me for a card I sent and I used the opportunity of her sounding terrible to ask what was wrong. She shared her symptoms and I advised her to call her doctor. I was surprised that it wasn't difficult to persuade her; she's typically quite stubborn. She must be scared — living alone. I would be also. I will hear from her again after her telehealth visit with her doctor…

Our mutual friend, Jen,[15] is a social worker in a Brooklyn hospital. She said that more people are being discharged but the ICU cases do not recover. That corroborates reporting on immunity (as uncertain as that is) playing a significant role in the disease's trajectory. I inquired about her accounts of Remdesivir and she said that it is looking less promising than previously thought.

Sunday 4.26.2020

I think there is something seriously wrong with me. We are about to enter week 7 of

the home stay and I am feeling okay with that — in fact I like it and I feel guilty for it. Am I a misanthrope or a sociopath? Am I a really boring person? Probably and most certainly. My days are filled with activity; there is not one moment from the time I awake to when I return to bed that I do not have something to do. And, I have seldom felt bored, and that was only because I didn't feel like doing what was on my task list. While I do waste a good deal of time in the evenings watching movies or a series with Tara, that is a choice (albeit a bad one) that I am making. Unfortunately, there are a good many people in my life that are not as *fortunate* in being able to *work* from home. My mother-in-law continues to go to work at a nursing home. And, that is frightening for everyone. My own parents are riding this out alone in different states as my dad is being treated for cancer in New York and my mom is in Florida. He has two more treatments and his course will be completed in early June. I am hoping that after his recuperation he can join my mom in Florida somehow. It seems that just having one other person makes a difference in weathering the social isolation — at least that is the case for me.

Monday 4.27.2020

Last week the principal of the school where I teach lost his father to COVID. Kevin[16] sent an email last night along with his late Sunday evening weekly email to personally inform faculty and staff. His father's death has affected me and personalized COVID in a different way than the knowledge of high mortality figures and the intermittent screeching sirens that I hear. Each of these evoke a sense of fear. But since he and I are relatively near in age, I imagine his father was around the same age as my father. And, I have been most concerned about my father because of his cancer and also his underlying condition of heart disease.

Kevin refers to the faculty, staff, students, parents, and alumni as family. We have taught his eldest child and now another one of his three children. I'm certain that

many within our community feel as awful as I do for Kevin and his family as we are left wondering how much closer is death going to come to us.

Thursday 4.30.2020

This diary is turning into a personal morbidity and mortality report. I write as Tara is still sleeping. When she awakes we are going over to our friend's. Yesterday we received a call indicating that Leslie was vomiting uncontrollably again. Her neighbor and friend, Patricia,[17] is currently riding this out in the South with her family. She contacted Tara because Tara and Natalie[18] (our resident cat rescue cooperators) are using Patricia's empty apartment for a foster cat that was found on the property. Tara took "Quinn" to the vet and she seems to be recovering from a host of health issues nicely and will be adopted.

When we went to Leslie's yesterday, she looked white as a sheet. She was on the couch and despite our pleas, she refused to go to urgent care. I was in touch with her siblings and her brother, a retired nurse, made some suggestions. I went to the pharmacy to gather up some OTC remedies and pushed some pedialyte on her to replenish her electrolytes, which she vomited up before we left. Tara and I are resolved this morning to call 911 if she does not agree to allow us to accompany her to urgent care. I informed her sister via text last night and she agreed with this course of action.

I am trying to temper my anger and frustration with her, but the truth is that I am scared. Leslie is so fucking difficult, especially when it comes to her health care. She typically ignores problems, has a shitty GP, and does not comply with his treatment plans. I had to fight with her to enter her apartment yesterday.

5:21 pm

After spending several hours at Leslie's, we are back home feeling much better that our friend is not currently dying. She drank fluids and even ate a half sandwich while we were there. And, it was actually pleasant to be working in another location other than my apartment (well, if I am going to violate a social distancing measure, I may as well enjoy it).

5.1.2020

This week went rather quickly and I don't know what to attribute such speed. It's Friday (as if that matters). It is also the first day of May — another water-logged day not unlike April just a bit more balmy.

There has been some indication that my return to work in the fall, which has not yet been determined whether we will physically meet for classes, will almost certainly look different. I signed an email petition from our union requiring safety measures put in place. During our faculty meeting, colleagues as well as my AP expressed concern about not only being in a crowded building but also taking the subway. And, this morning on the news I heard that the DOE may institute a staggered schedule and/or hybrid remote learning alongside traditional classes. This is interesting and I am curious to know more details. I hope that whatever plans that are made, we have sufficient time to roll them out. That, of course, would mean that there is some more understanding about the course of the disease and the public health interventions being planned.

Ok, enough procrastinating, it is time to self test for my upcoming Spanish exam — time is passing quickly as my anxiety about the exam increases.

5.4.2020

The preliminary diagnosis is that Leslie has kidney stones. She will need to return to urgent care this week for a ct scan and ultrasound to confirm. I am temporarily relieved as visions of attending her funeral played out over the course of the last week in my mind.

Leslie, like many others, was afraid to go to urgent care or worse yet, a hospital in spite of her dire health condition, immense pain on her side and uncontrollable vomiting.[19] She finally was amenable to my plea (and that of her siblings and other friends) Saturday evening. Tara and I saw her and she had a sickly pallor, which even she could see. Since the urgent care nearby was already closed, we went yesterday morning.

I called Leslie late this morning and she seems to be feeling somewhat better, as she is drinking much more and eating (part of her ill feeling was her aversion to eating).

Urgent care will be getting a mobile cat-scan unit and she will return for a test. Hopefully that will confirm kidney stones, which is treatable!

5.7.2020

The impending Spanish language exam that I am taking late this afternoon has prompted a stream of critical thoughts about American isolationism. My disappointment about my own stubborn monolingualism has turned to thoughts about the U.S.'s enduring cycle of refusal to foster polyglotism alongside trenchant xenophobia, chauvinism, and racism. The pandemic has unfortunately reinforced U.S. government policy of isolationism[20] when it is an opportunity for an otherwise approach. Yet, the Trump administration has used the pandemic to double down on already horrifically misguided immigration policies. His rhetoric grounded

in racism and nationalist competitiveness continues to alienate rather than engage in collaboration and mutual support when it is most needed. This is not surprising, yet it is still maddenly upsetting.

Domestically, he wants to open U.S. business again, essentially claiming that sickness and death is the cost of business, taking a hard biopolitical stance in implying that some peoples' lives (namely people of color) are sacrificial. Added to that, Trump has indicated that he wants to disband the coronavirus task force. Even as he speaks out of both sides of his mouth, it seems that the task force will at least be severely slimmed down by the end of May or beginning of June.[21]

As there is a decline in COVID cases and deaths here in New York, other cities like Chicago and Washington D.C. have seen a rise. In spite of that, life inside New York City remains the same. It seems, at least, Governor Cuomo understands that social distancing has helped reduce the disease burden and will (hopefully) not be hasty in a return to "business as usual." As Montana sends some of their students back to public school today, it remains to be seen what fall 2020 will look like for NYC public schools. Various ideas and models are currently being floated, such as block scheduling, staggered schedules, hybrid learning, community/resource-based sites, etc. Yesterday, the NYC public schools chancellor sent an email that we can now use zoom again to teach since it has been made more secure. I am taking this as a sign that there are some plans being put in place (maybe only as a contingency) for a continuation of remote learning this fall. However, uncertainty remains the word of the day.

5.9.2020

I finished planning my last lesson for Introduction to Medical Anthropology earlier than usual today. With this extra time, my plans to go for a long walk are foiled by

the “polar vortex.”[22] In my normal life, I would typically walk to work on a 45-degree morning with sun. However, the combined annoyance of a cold May day and the inertia of sitting by my computer has raised the standard for my mobility during this period of home stay. So I will sit here, at my desk, and type — taking moments to soak in the sunny vista from my window.

Tomorrow poses a fresh dilemma. My wife, brother, sister-in-law, and I have agreed to have a socially distanced Mother’s Day visit with my mother-in-law in Queens. She is having a particularly difficult time being away from family, becoming more acute by the day. During our Thursday evening zoom she tried to casually convince us to come inside her home. Each of us refused and said that would violate the current measures in place. And, this morning she texted that she would like us to come in briefly to see her new furniture. To that, we again politely declined. I hope that tomorrow does not feel awkward, as we: the younger generation try to hold to our conviction as we all shiver in my in-laws backyard.

Tuesday 5.12.2020

I lost the habit of identifying the day of week for several entries above. It is probably an indication of the monotony of life at the moment. I’m taking a break from grading hell right now, if only to maintain a small hold on my sanity. This may seem like an embellishment, but the boredom of repeating the same comments while seriously engaging in work is an exhausting business. One that I cannot say I am always fully committed to doing. Usually, I can commiserate with colleagues about students (which I have mixed feelings about — it is both an outlet but also a distraction). To some extent, Tara has served as a nice collaborator, in that regard, during these moments of social isolation. She gets her share of subpar work from students and annoying questions… However, she is busy right now and I need to scream after reading each essay or two. This entry will need to serve as my scream!

> "I lost the habit of identifying the day of week for several entries above. It is probably an indication of the monotony of life at the moment."

Thursday 5.14.2020

Yesterday's (masked) walk over the Brooklyn Bridge did not have the same salubrious effects as the first one, one week prior. Adding to the swirl of odd emotions I was feeling, I ran into a parent of a former student, who told me that her daughter, Emily,[23] was headed to U Chicago this fall (Judy[24] holds out hope that the semester beginning one month later than other campuses will mean in-person classes). Judy also told me that her brother (whom she was not close with) died from COVID. Seeing her niece, who has been around him, required that her own family self quarantine for two weeks.

In the evening, I attended an end-of-semester anthropology party. And, I am surprised by how anxiety-provoking these events are for me even by zoom. Judging by the significant prodding mostly everyone needed to speak, I imagine others had been dealing with some feelings also. As awkward as it was, it was also good to "see" people from the department. I don't know if that means a strange satisfaction with their *proof of life* or a sense of belonging in something beyond our physical walls.

> "In the evening, I attended an end-of-

semester anthropology party. And, I am surprised by how anxiety-provoking these events are for me even by zoom."

The wine I drank made me tired and I fell asleep around 10 on the couch. Awaking at 11, I read a rude email response from a student. That is pretty uncommon, yet bothersome nonetheless. In my response I cc'd her guidance counselor, so she can deal with whatever emotional issues are gnawing at her. Today I have two phone calls to make to the family's of students. And, another phone call owed to my own father. The latter will be the most difficult. My phone calls and even texts to him have slowed, since COVID has wound its way into our usual political differences.[25] Strangled communication usually leaves me feeling quite upset (and disappointed).

Leslie had a sonogram and her CT-scan is scheduled for tomorrow. It seems that there is a "blockage" in her kidneys and nothing seems to be ruled out at the moment. I am hoping that the scan can confirm kidney stones.

Saturday 5.16.2020

Another day of grading…well not an entire day, but enough. It is astounding how some of my students can complete an assignment with near perfection and others ignore directions entirely or interpret them so incorrectly. One student sent me no fewer than a half dozen emails trying to get clear on the expectations. However, it seemed to pay off — he did quite well.

While I complain about the monotony of grading, it gives me some sense of normalcy. There is some continuity. This is what I would be doing today May 16th

even if the global pandemic weren't occurring. It also provides a sense of purpose (or at least I delude myself into thinking that my students need my feedback). In any case, more for me to grade tomorrow…

> "While I complain about the monotony of grading, it gives me some sense of normalcy."

Monday 5.18.2020

My niece is 5 years old today! I spoke to her by phone and she was ecstatic with all her gifts. I remember the day she was born, Tara and I borrowed a car and drove up to Greenwich Hospital to see her tightly swaddled under a sun lamp. Even though I don't see my nieces and nephew frequently, I do try to make their birthdays each year. This year I had relied on amazon, so far, to deliver gifts to replace my physical presence on their birthdays along with a phone or skype call.

Wednesday 5.20.2020

In today's most recent round of "care at a distance,"[26] I awoke to a text from my mom apologizing for missing my call yesterday with a report about my Dad's back pain and my sister's marital trouble. I ignored the second, because I do not care to be a marital therapist, especially by a second order with my mom. I owe her a call though.

I nagged Leslie and my father to stay on top of their medical care. About 20 minutes ago I spoke with a student who has been struggling to remain motivated and organized during this time of distance learning. I have had several students with this very problem. And, while my ability to empathize is short, my ability to strategize compensates. I have gone so far as making a schedule for a student. As I was offering to do this, I recognized that this was going to be a waste of time. This student has struggled with depression even prior to our shift to digital learning. My motivation for reaching out to students like the latter example, is mainly bureaucratic. It is technically (but not contractually) my job to continue to bother students even when they have made it clear they wish to be left alone or cannot deal with academic issues because of more urgent mental health related ones. Sometimes the two are related, but in some situations the mental health issue completely interferes with a student's academics and extracurricular matters. The guidance department tries to enlist our help, but they are bound by privacy to limit exactly what can be shared. Moreover, I am not trained to deal with clinical or behavioral issues anyway. So I am left with my scheduling/time management advice — as futile as it may seem. I ask the student I spoke with today, "Do you have a daily routine?" By the time we gave our salutations, I was not convinced this student would follow up with my advice. But I logged our interaction into one of the school's databases. Other teachers, his guidance counselor, and administrators can see this attempt at outreach — and do what? Well, I made an appointment to speak with him in a week to assess his progress. Let's wait and see... Another student, whom I spoke with last Thursday, along with her parents has just submitted her annotated bibliography. Is that success? Considering she hadn't been submitting work, I suppose it is a qualified success. I gave her a one day extension and that turned into five. The quality of her work is poor. But at least, I do not have to send a nagging email to her and her parents in advance of tomorrow's check in conversation. We can just discuss her need to persevere and be more committed. She had these issues prior to distance learning.

Lee Brando

Friday 5.22.2020

As I wait to speak with my advisor about summer plans for fieldwork within my apartment, I reflect upon how working from home has increased my clipped commitment to one activity. One of my complaints about my work (pre-COVID) has been the daily shift of activities that are often unrelated. This leaves me exhausted in having to summon the appropriate information. Awakening at 5:45 am hadn't helped my ability to focus. Now I get to laze around until 7:45! And, admittedly this week I slept past 8... but I have found that I am still tired. It is possible that my increased flitting from one activity to the next continues to drain my energy and leave me feeling rather unaccomplished as I have given in to a nap or multitasking during two overlapping zoom conference calls. I think I may need some more physical activity. For now, I will listen to this NPR piece on the caveats of antibody testing while grading thesis statements and mentally preparing for my phone call ▯

Monday 5.25.2020

Censored by the author

Footnotes

[1] March 13-25 were written retrospectively.

[2] Reference
https://www.nytimes.com/article/free-e-book-answers-to-your-coronavirus-que

stions.html

[3] This is a pseudonym.

[4] This is a pseudonym.

[5] https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/24/us/coronavirus-lockdown-domestic-violence.html

[6] https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/2020-03-20-Notice-New-York-on-Pause-Order.pdf

[7] pseudonym

[8] https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/08/style/self-care/seder-easter-zoom-coronavirus.html

[9] https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/08/nyregion/new-york-coronavirus-response-delays.html

[10] https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/08/nyregion/new-york-coronavirus-response-delays.html

[11] pseudonym

[12] The following editorials were written by my colleagues and published in *The Daily News* and *The New York Times*, respectively. They called for the closure of NYC public schools:

https://www.nydailynews.com/opinion/ny-oped-bringing-home-homework-and-the-virus-20200313-ycmabw5x25ad3ofryw6f2utuzq-story.html and https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/14/opinion/contributors/close-new-york-schoos.html. I was one of the signatories of the NYT piece.

Recently, there was another criticising the mayor in his mismanagement and lack of planning: https://www.nydailynews.com/opinion/ny-oped-flunk-de-blasio-on-his-covid-school-response-20200413-apcvjpchefbcrazi77zzpzm6ta-story.html.

[13] https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/14/politics/donald-trump-coronavirus-governors-economy/index.html

[14] pseudonym

[15] pseudonym

[16] pseudonym

[17] pseudonym

[18] pseudonym

[19] See Hseih, Paul. (April 20, 2020). "Do Not Delay Urgent Medical Care Due To The COVID-19 Coronavirus Pandemic," *Forbes*. Accessed May 4, 2020,

"https://www.forbes.com/sites/paulhsieh/2020/04/20/do-not-delay-urgent-medical-care-due-to-the-covid-19-coronavirus-pandemic/#2335df59763e.

Stone, Will and Elly Yu. (May 6, 2020) "COVID-19 Fears May Be Causing People To Ignore Medical Emergencies," *National Public Radio*, accessed May 6, 2020.

https://www.npr.org/2020/05/06/851173949/covid-19-fears-may-be-causing-people-to-ignore-medical-emergencies.

[20] https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/27/trump-covid-19-global-response-ilhan-omar

[21] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52553829

[22] https://patch.com/new-york/new-york-city/nyc-weather-polar-vortex-could-bring-snow-may

[23] pseudonym

[24] Pseudonym for Emily's mom

[25] Allam, Hannah. (May 15, 2020). "'Us Vs. Them' In A Pandemic: Researchers Warn Divisions Could Get Dangerous," NPR

https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/05/15/857165715/us-vs-them-in-a-pandemic-researchers-warn-divisions-could-get-dangerous

[26] Pols, Jeannette. 2012. *Care at a Distance: On the Closeness of Technology*. The Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press.