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Crisis Curriculum: Poetic ethnography through crisis, coping and community Kimmika Williams-Witherspoon

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Crisis curriculum: Poetic ethnography through crisis, coping and community

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Abstract

In the face of the pandemic, Temple University rushed to transition to online or remote learning. As faculty quickly adjusted their classes to accommodate these unprecedented changes, many of us quickly realized that our students' needs, likewise, shifted drastically. In response to this new reality, I developed a crisis curriculum that drew upon the best of ethnographic methods coupled with digital technology to turn the gaze on the Poetic Ethnography students themselves and capture a unique look at the COVID-19 crisis.

Key words

COVID-19, Corona Virus, Pedagogy, Poetry, Ethnography.

Introduction

In THTR 2008, Poetic Ethnography, the class regularly uses poetry and poetic sensibilities to interrogate research paradigms and methodologies in an effort to 'unpack' examinations of culture and community. In the middle of a global pandemic, students were encouraged and empowered by using the poetic-influenced ethnographies and ethnographically-based poetry to tell their stories and the stories of their communities in a time of crisis.

In a traditional semester, the Poetic Ethnography class would have culminated into a live, devised theatre performance culled together from the poetic ethnographies chronicling their fieldwork throughout the semester, along with their classwork in autoethnography. But this year, because of the quarantine and social distancing that closed America from March through May, that performance piece, *A Chronic, Intractable Longing*, that grew out of the Crisis Curriculum that I developed, would premiere on Facebook Live, March 9, 2020. This chapter interrogates poetic ethnography as research methodology and as a form of performance art that can mediate crisis and trauma.



Contextualizing the historical moment

In December, 2019, China began acknowledging the unexpected and devastating effects of a contagion said to have originated from in and around the Wuhan Markets. By January, the virus spread, first to Italy and then to other surrounding European nations. The Trump Administration was made aware of the potential danger of this rapidly spreading coronavirus strain in January. (Perez-Pena and McNeil Jr., 2020) By February, the number of cases of individuals contracting the virus continued to climb globally. Temple students went off for our regularly-scheduled Spring Break on March 3, 2020. By Wednesday, March 12, 2020, the university community was told that we would be fully online by the following Monday, March 16, 2020. Students without extenuating circumstances were given an additional week (until March 20, 2020) to move out of the dorms for a partial refund. Those students living in apartments surrounding campus began to hunker down in their bunkers, reluctant to break their leases. The rest of us began to settle in to our respective places and tackle the task at hand.

Poetic ethnography as research

While some scholars debate the value of “poetry, poetic expression and poetic sensibility in everyday life and particularly in research”, as Robert Rinehart suggests, the real question is “can poetry and poetic expression and dissemination of research through poetry—equally be justified as research?” (Rinehart 2018, 2). “Harkening back to Clifford Geertz (1973) and his concept of “thick descriptions”, ethnographies (even poetic ones) provide exposition or background information to help audience members/readers conceptualize and understand cultures” (Williams-Witherspoon 2013, 174).

Poetic ethnographies are “poetic testimonials”—narratives, in various styles and forms telling the story of particular groups of people.” (Williams-Witherspoon 2017, 1)
Poetic ethnographies “combat racial framing of marginalized groups and the oftentimes, negative perceptions of complex positionalities (i.e., race, class and gender. (Williams-Witherspoon 2017, 1; Maher and Tetreault 1993)

My ongoing project as an anthropologist, playwright and performance poet is to raise the profile of poetic ethnography both in the field and on the American stage. After all, poetry—second only to storytelling—are two of the oldest forms of performance known to man. Poetry as performance has a rich trajectory. “The oldest examples of Performance Poetry can be found in the ancient Egyptian or Kemetic writing from the Fifth Dynasty (from 2494 to 2345 BC) in the pyramid texts, *Instructions in Wisdom*” (Williams-Witherspoon 2017, 2) These texts, according to Miriam Lichtheim, were written to be read aloud or *performed*. (Lichtheim 1975)

In India and Asia, Sanskrit is both a language and a culture. Sanskrit drama is traditionally recognised as part of Sanskrit literature—or the classical literature of India, which flourished from 1500 BC to AD 1100. A foundation of Indian literature is the Mahabharata. The Mahabharata of Vyasa is recognized as the longest epic *poem* in world literature. It is composed of 100,000 verses.

And in the Western world, although we oftentimes forget it, the earliest Greek plays were actually *poetry*. When Thespiis stepped out of the chorus to deliver lines of dialogue, the lines of dialogue and the story itself were once all in verse. Relying on language, rhythm and meter, Aeschylus (525 BCE-456 BCE) and Sophocles (496-406 BCE) would continue the tradition. Poetry, then, is one of the oldest forms of performance.

With that in mind, as a chief component of *devised theatre*, at Temple University, I teach a course that introduces students to the depth and use-value of poetic ethnography as a research methodology and as a genre of performance. Devised theatre “takes data and research findings directly to the people through its performative component.” (Williams-Witherspoon 2019, 204) While Jan Cohen-Cruz talks

about this kind of performance work as “applied research”, she also suggests that devised performance theatre emerges “directly from an individual or group of people rather than beginning with a written script.” (Cohen-Cruz 2010, 5) “Devising reflects the belief that all of us can be expressive in ways worthy of attention, gesturing towards the democratic impulse in engaged work.” (Cohen-Cruz 2010, 5)

The course, THTR 2008 Poetic Ethnography “operates both as ethnodrama and as a theatre hybrid that incorporates several tightly structured field site audio and video, digital storytelling projects into its thirteen-week curriculum.” (Williams-Witherspoon, 2019, 201) Typically, “students create new forms of knowledge through their research and the development of alternative ethnographies.” (Williams-Witherspoon, 2019: *ibid*) The course is offered each spring as a Theater Studies elective and as a requirement towards our Community Engaged Theater Certificate programme in the Theater Department in the Center for the Performing and Cinematic Arts at Temple University.

While teaching the course spring 2020, the coronavirus pandemic brought the US federal, state and local municipalities, business, schools, colleges and organizations to a screeching halt all across America by mid-March. Globally, the number of COVID-positive patients was in the hundreds of thousands and the death toll was slowly mounting. At Temple University, faculty and students alike had less than a week following our Spring Break (March 1–8, 2020) to pivot and make the transition to remote learning through Zoom.

Fieldwork

While NOT a humanities course, Poetic Ethnography introduces students to the concepts of ethnography and fieldwork as components of *storytelling*. Because Poetic Ethnography is also designated as a *community-based learning course (CBL)*, the CBL designation requires that students also engage with some aspect of the Philadelphia arts and culture scene and, in our case, that means conducting field work with various community organizations and/or neighborhoods.

Prior to the pivot to remote instruction, the class spent seven weeks learning the distinctions between ethnography, autoethnography and poetic ethnography. In a lecture/discussion/performance lab setting, the students’ assignments included several opportunities for practicing interview techniques, picking field sites in Philadelphia neighborhoods and/or institutions (that had to be, purposely, “outside of their usual field of experience”), and learning to craft narratives and poetic ethnographies in and around those field sites.

“The student conducts research in the field (often a closed or bounded community—i.e., neighborhood, city, event, or special occasion.” (Williams-Witherspoon 2017, 13) As a community-based learning course invested in training students to develop skillsets to use *art* for *social activism*, the course curriculum incorporates assignments to teach a new form of data collection as well as how to turn traditional ethnographic research into *poetic ethnography*. Throughout the semester, students are required to visit their field sites at least four times and document those field site visits as poetic reflections. One of the four visits has to culminate into an interview with a stakeholder from the approved site. By the semester’s end, students must produce two deliverables specific to the field site assignments—a poetry video and a poetry audio piece from one or more of their poetic ethnographies written about their field sites that incorporate a snippet of their recorded stakeholder interview.

Typically, the field site assignments yield some of the best work. The field site poetic ethnographies lead to each student’s increased awareness of social issues and concerns and how their work can contribute to it. Fieldwork assignments are scaffolded into smaller lessons about developing interview questions, using cell phones for data collection, interview techniques, ethics versus authenticity, noticing our environment, developing observation skills and synthesizing multiple ways of talking

about a community. As an example, for one of their early fieldwork assignments, students are asked to pick a current local or world news article about the community site, issue or concern and then to turn that *data* into an example of poetic ethnography. It gives students an opportunity to critically think about what *others say* about a neighborhood, group or issue that they are now involved in. Through the assignment, they learn metaliteracy and how to discern between *informed resource material* versus uninformed resource materials; and it helps to contextualize their own research.

Researching and writing these field site poetic ethnographies teaches students to think about the multi-focal ways to *disseminate* political and socio-cultural data to a variety of stakeholders. That particular assignment, and others like it, encourages *applied performance art* and situates the component parts of devised theatre (like the choreopoem, poetry, storytelling and personal narratives) as a cultural product that can both contribute to theatre production *and* to socio-cultural research.

As metaliteracy (sometimes called, *information literacy*), assignments like this one teaches students how to take one kind of *data*, interrogate it and then convert material into poetic ethnography. These exercises also teach students how to really *be* ethnographers—using multiple methodologies to investigate and interrogate cultural practice. The students often find a way to make the news and events going on around them relevant to their own lives.

Pivoting

Fortunately for the 14 students (four male and eight female identified students) in the Theatre Studies class, THTR 2008 Poetic Ethnography, we had already formed *community*, thanks to roughly seven weeks of in-person, bricks-and-mortar instruction. And then, the world changed. The academy as we know it was abruptly transformed. In a matter of days, as local and state governments began to take the number of COVID-19 cases seriously enough to propose and issue *stay-at-home orders*, college campuses like ours at Temple were transformed overnight into variable *ghost towns*. Governor Tom Wolf of Pennsylvania and Mayor James Kenney in Philadelphia issued “Shelter-in-place” orders and everywhere you turned, people were worried and talking about COVID-19 and “social distancing”.

Coping

In the seven weeks to follow, students and faculty alike were anxious. As the university prepared to close, many students moved back home—unwillingly—while others petitioned the university for permission to stay on campus and not have to return home to unsafe conditions. In the midst of all that transition, the students in the Poetic Ethnography class, who had each already spent several weeks conducting research in their chosen community field sites (again, chosen specifically because it was different from their own field of experience but still of some interest to each of them), found themselves in quarantine with half of the semester’s assignments yet to write.

As an instructor, I couldn’t require students to leave their shelter-in-place, quarantine locations. Now, because of so many students returning home, many were literally miles away from their original field sites. New field sites needed to be chosen and they all needed to be virtual.

The Poetic Ethnography class began meeting synchronously on Zoom every Tuesday and Thursday from 11:30–12:20 during our regularly-scheduled class-time. Before we left our original face to face classroom setting, I asked all of my students in the various classes where and how they would be riding out the self-quarantine and stay-at-home orders and was assured that everyone would remain on the east coast. Two weeks later, however, a frantic mother in Seattle demanded that her daughter move out of the dorms and fly home (despite the pandemic in their state) after airline stocks began to plummet and airfares got so cheap she couldn’t ignore it. As a result, one student was on a three-hour

time difference and had to meet us on Zoom, her time, at 8:30 am in the morning. Except for the day she was packing and then flying out, she never missed a class.

Before the pandemic, in the bricks-and-mortar version of our class, every time the students walked into Randall Theater, our black box classroom and performance space in Tomlinson Hall, they were given an ethnographic *prompt* and asked to craft an extemporaneous, free-write in ten minutes. With the anxiety surrounding quarantine and COVID-19, *time* was precious and, for many of the students suffering from anxiety and other health-related issues, it seemed also precarious. To lesson anxiety and to allow students an opportunity for more reflection and contemplation, with the shift to a coronavirus-impacted curriculum, the prompts were sent out through Canvas the night before.

Window Pane

By Sarah Fitzgerald

For days
All of the cars
Remain parked
In the same spot
Raindrops plummet
From leaves
Trees
Keeping time
Apocalyptic metronomes
Grey washed gravel streams
Flood with worry
Into the streets
Where some day
We will once again
Meet

We started beginning each session with what I took to calling *the COVID-19 check-in*. I took roll and greeted each, individual student, checking in to see how they were, and asking how it was going in each of their respective quarantine locations. It took much-needed time away from our sessions and cut into our in-Zoom class time considerably but given the level of anxiety that students were emailing me about, I felt it was necessary.

As an officer on Temple University's Faculty Senate and a member of so many other committees (a curse of junior faculty and Faculty of Color in becoming the *go-to* person for service obligations because of a deep sense of reciprocity and commitment to scholarship, leadership and diversity), I would share with all my students whatever new information *I had* at the start of each class in an attempt to lessen fears and to promote transparency. In the class, *the COVID-19 check-in* would cover new information coming out on the dreaded virus, COVID-19 itself, extensions on income tax, voting, resources for tenant/landlord arbitration, along with campus issues and changes as well as news and information to help the students cope with the current crisis and the economic and health and wellness issues many of us were experiencing because of it. The word must have gotten out because a journalism and media studies graduate student contacted me a week or so later asking for an interview and wrote an article about faculty who were advocating for students (Cleves et al. 2020).

In the class, "students are encouraged to think critically about socio-political issues in municipalities related to people living/working/commuting in their various neighborhoods." (Williams-Witherspoon 2019, 211) As the COVID-19 crisis mounted and we had to pivot to remote learning, it made sense to

likewise pivot our ethnographies to cover the crisis in our cities and our neighborhoods from the student's point of view. Shifting to a *crisis curriculum*, our morning COVID-19 check-ins often led to lengthy discussions about the socio-political issues and health inequities that helped to inform the students' work. The fieldwork was all around us and the ethnographies and autoethnographies were even more organic.

Field Site 3: General Strike

By Sarah Fitzgerald

*The revolution
will not be a negotiation
Or a compromise
The time has arrived
to pick a side
Get off the fence
And the bench
We
Are the wrench
In the machine
Trying to be everything
To everyone
Arbitrate
And people please
Means nothing
To this disease
It might get you
A pat on the head
Or a place
In the master's bed
but
We
refuse to be led
Back onto the sinking ship
The time has arrived
For us to swim
So take a deep breath
Go within
Dying to keep our hands clean
Amid the crumbling
Some won't make it out
We
will not escape unscathed
Radical change
Holds the key
To imagine a future
That arrives 7 generations after me*

Crisis Curriculum

Neurobiologist Mary Helen Immordino-Yang suggests that “we only think deeply about what we care about.” (Immordino-Yang 2016) With that in mind, what I began calling *Crisis Curriculum* seemed like a logical outgrowth of trauma-informed curricula. (Crosby 2015) In an attempt to ‘leverage emotions’ and encourage deep learning through activities and assignments that utilize self-representing, auto-ethnography, rather than ignoring or deflecting what was going on all around us, instead, I crafted prompts and assignments that encouraged students to ‘unpack’ their own emotions about the pandemic, about the isolation, about their anxiety, about the news. That *crisis curriculum* attempted to build links between subject matter and students’ individual cultural memory, ethics and reflections. The prompts were meant to promote student wellness by allowing for the privileging of ‘multiple identities’, emotions and cultural memory.

COVID-19. March-19.

By: LaRae Mays-Hardy

*I crossed the threshold of 22 at dawn
My candle forgets its own mortality My candle burns with ferocity to support a life
Sunlight losing its race with shadows Sunlight has barely eclipsed by unknown
Withering on all except the roses at my bedside Roses making good on the promise of name
This is how to wilt without permission This is how to be tenacious in foreign
land
I was groomed to make rose of myself Today, I make garden of
myself
Prophesied to stretch toward rays Overflow with fragrant abundance
Even when she resigns herself to oblivion In spite of nutrients turning to droplets
This is how to bloom on temporary time This is how to grow past the ticking
clock
I saw the world erupt to flame on my anniversary I saw community burst beyond anniversary
Unfurl her spine to exhibit burn wounds Sprouting love in the wake of inferno
Fashion smokehouses of street corners Patchwork of crisp thorns quilting beauty
This is how to burn aromatic and breathless This is how to burn without
extinguishing
This is how to blossom
In shaken soil*

We were caught in a media maelstrom—not just in the US—but from around the globe. Day in and day out—all day, it seemed, the quotidian nature of reporting on the White House, along with the number of pandemic infected cases and fatalities felt like it was stifling and choking so many of us, and student anxiety levels were high. We couldn’t get away from the elephant in the room—quarantine, *lockdown*, social-distancing, isolation, the economic issues. The climate and the political three-ring circus daily broadcasted across all our televisions and social media platforms kept us inundated in ineptness, disease and death, and so I chose not to ignore it but to use it in our curriculum.

Forging ahead with our audio and video assignments from their earlier fieldwork during the first seven weeks of the semester, I also encouraged students not to forget about their own autoethnographies about the challenges and effects of quarantining. Some of our class writing prompts included:

1. Mother Nature strikes back
2. Tipping point
3. Transcending red and blue

4. Breath
5. The new normal
6. Laying in the shadow
7. Outside my window

and many others.

Both the poetic-ethnography and auto-ethnography assignments were meant to keep the students engaged, while at the same time, allowing each of them an opportunity to think through and articulate their own, personal perspectives on the virus, the gargantuan efforts of essential service personnel and first responders, along with the economic challenges and/or isolation that many of them were experiencing!

As the days became weeks, with the constant imposition of *just-breaking news* and so much happening on the federal, state and local relief efforts, I kept insisting that our responsibilities in the class as social activist/artists and poetic ethnographers was to chronicle the proliferation of news stories, health issues, economic implications and socio-cultural issues that were creeping up and/or looming on the horizon as a result of the rapid spread of COVID-19.

There was attrition. Disparities in housing, employment and resources meant that for many of our students—in particular international students and men and women of colour, one student completely fell off the radar following our switch to online learning. I reached out to the student and sent several emails. When there was no response, I notified my chair, Associate Dean and Dean of Students; but they never told me what happened to that student.

For many of our students who didn't go home immediately, but rather, opted instead to stay on campus and rough it out and, much like their counterparts who had moved out of the dorm when the university offered them reimbursement, quarantine isolation was difficult and many students across my course load began suffering en masse from fear and anxiety-fueled health concerns (like sleeplessness, loss of focus, binge-eating and depression). These new student issues began to surface about two weeks into the quarantine, compounded by a loss or reduction in income, food insecurity, isolation and an ever-increasing workload from many of their instructors struggling to come up with innovative ways to deliver content and to assess student-learning in this new environment.

Community

Most theatre courses are actively built around assignments meant to promote self-reflection. For Poetic Ethnography, participant/observations, personal narratives and poetic ethnographies about the communities around them and socio-cultural phenomenon was still relevant. In fact, many students reported out in passing that they found their work writing the ethnographies was a distraction from the fear and anxiety that they were suffering from and/or precipitated by in their other classes.

In our face-to-face, traditional classes, students are always encouraged to share their work each class period. Whether it's homework, or in-class writing prompts, students are called on, one-by-one or volunteer to read aloud their first or subsequent drafts. After each piece, I always provide an opportunity for class feedback in the form of peer critique, along with instructor comments and suggestions. From day one, I model the appropriate form of critique—asking for “*comments, criticisms, suggestions, questions.*” The students who have already taken a class with me usually start the feedback—often acknowledging a particular line or phrase that was especially poignant or impactful. As students become more and more adept at ethnography in poetic form, they can soon make complex observations about meter, rhythm or form, while I conclude each student's feedback session by acknowledging the style, form, line or phrasing that resonates with me as an audience member and, when applicable, suggesting some other things to think about (i.e. rhyme, rhythm,

repetition, word choice etcetera) that the student might consider in subsequent edits and re-writes, as well. The sharing establishes the concept of drafts and edits and sets up the best practices for tweaking and reworking material for the two distinctly different kinds of deliverable modalities—performance versus print. Below, is a piece by then junior Teyanna Stone, that grew out of our self-reflection assignment.

Untouchable

*Some shit you can't touch
Some shit you can't do
Some shit you can't say
And you gonna have to deal with it*

*This crown on my head
Adapts to emotions
Every kink and curl
A roadmap to heaven*

*My tongue speaks
Life and death
This dialect is poison
To those not chosen to use it*

*This skin was dipped
In the sun's fountain of joy and gold
It never was
Or will be ugly*

*My swag can't be
Copied and pasted
Onto beings not capable
Of the cosmic radiation*

*You can't touch this
And you feel some type of way
But don't be mad
Just appreciate*

*Don't make money
Off stuff you stole
Don't monetize my existence
And call it your own*

*Don't cash out
On this masterpiece
This design
Is exclusive*

*You're in the presence
Of greatness*

Learn and listen
Grow and gratify

My shit
Is mine
You can look
But don't touch

While ethnographic writing in the field is usually a single, solitary practice, poetic ethnography is meant to be performed as *applied research* and, as such, students are encouraged early on, both through our discussions and our readings, to think seriously about accountability, authorship, ethics, truths, perspectives, point-of-view and responsibility when we are observing and writing ethnography and when respondents and community members are relying on us to *tell their stories*.

When the class converted to remote instruction, Poetic Ethnography students continued to *share out* both homework assignments and daily prompts in each class on Zoom. Because we were already in the second half of the semester where (if we were in the physical classroom setting) I would have normally been engaged in instructing students in *theatricality* and *performance technique*. In this format, given the multiple technologies that we were employing in our instruction, I also included performance tips across mediums. We talked at length about physicality in a live performance versus a film or video performance. While we couldn't do as much in terms of gesture and the *choreography of movement* (Williams-Witherspoon 2017) that we would have normally done in the classroom setting, we still had to address posture and eye contact as well as enhanced production values: filming in horizontal frames when using cell phones, as well as the importance of backdrops, lighting and props as we build our performance in more compact ways for distribution in multiple modalities.

Because of and in spite of social distancing and quarantine in response to the pandemic, multiple *sharing* happened during each class. In addition to my feedback as instructor, students critiqued one another and by the semester's end, learned valuable skills in constructive criticism. In this way, the students both encouraged and challenged one another to craft better and better creative output.

But in the end, I always remind students that their blank piece of paper or blank computer document is their *world* each time they go to create a new piece. I try to instill in each student a sense of their own agency—that they are both the creator and actor of their ethnographies and, therefore, some of the ultimate decisions about form and tone in terms of suggestions and criticisms are theirs to make. A proponent of *free speech*, I also always remind students that their work is *their work*, but that they *always* have responsibility to their community and their subjects and/or field site participants. I encourage students to interrogate the multiple sides of an issue but to always be conscious of the ethics of participant/observation and our responsibility as ethnographers when taking on and telling someone else's story.

Building up to their final performance project, students had to produce two (2) audio and two (2) video pieces based on their field research and autoethnographies—two (2) and three (3) weeks into the quarantine. Because of the stay-at-home orders, some of the students had to utilise telephone interviews and email to complete their field research projects, but many of those students who had successfully completed their earlier field site assignments had gathered enough data to proceed with a little tweaking and flexibility. Only one or two students had to shift gears and reimagine their field site projects in lieu of the quarantine.

Outcomes

The traditional Poetic Ethnography class, as documented in *Poetic Ethnography and Metaliteracy: Empowering Voices in a Hybrid Theater Arts Course* (2019), is a theatre studies performance course

offered as an elective to theatre majors and minors and opened to the university community. Although not a designated Writing Intensive course, the class requires a great deal of writing of both autoethnography and poetic ethnographies. Focusing primarily on writing and field research during the first half of the semester, during the second half of the semester, in addition to writing poetic ethnographies, response papers to cross-curricular reading texts, the two poetic ethnography audio projects and the two poetic ethnography video projects, this class normally concludes with the creation, rehearsals, blocking and production of a devised theatre piece that I direct and where students share their ethnographic data and personal narrative with the larger Temple University and Philadelphia communities through performance.

Typically, the Poetic Ethnography class would create, rehearse and get to do three performances of their devised theater production culled from our semester's worth of work. That performance, typically scheduled for Randall Theater following the official end of classes and study days at the end of April and the performance, with minimal production-value, is advertised during our end of the semester *SemesterFest* over three shows and a two-day performance schedule. Additionally, prior to those devised theater performances, students in Poetic Ethnography are likewise invited to perform excerpts of their work from the original, devised theater piece on *The Bridge* live radio program, hosted by J. Michael Harrison on WRTI, Temple University's classical and jazz public radio station. In addition, Poetic Ethnography students are normally filmed, disseminated and archived on the Klein School of Media and Communication's television station. TUTV.

In my attempt to maintain academic continuity and to ensure a comparable learning experience, I had to think out of the box to address the performance outcomes for Poetic Ethnography students during this extraordinarily challenging time. As a necessary *crisis curriculum* adjustment, because of the quarantine, the Poetic Ethnography students now had to choose four (4) of their poetic ethnographies (previously marked *Performance*, either in their mid-term journals or our regularly-schedule peer-sharing segments each class period.) We could not physically create choreopoem nor come together to create the devised performance piece that we would normally have created in the traditional classroom setting, because of stay-at-home orders and social-distancing mandates. Instead, students were asked to create a film of their four (4) performance pieces, with appropriate production values and transitions.

Because our performance has always been our *final*, it was important to me that students had an opportunity to come together as a group to screen those final, individual, video projects so, using instructor's discretion, I asked students to Zoom in one final time during our regularly-scheduled finals period, Wednesday, May 5, 2020 from 10:30 to 12:30 where we screened the videos and students were assessed on content, delivery, creativity and production values.

With just a two-day turn-around, following our private, in class screening, my TA, senior LaRae Mays-Hardy, was then tasked with editing all of the pieces into a 90-minute film to fulfill the requirements for her Honor's Independent Study. That film, *A Chronic Intractable Longing*, was later screened on Temple Theater's online platform and Facebook Live, Friday, May, 8, 2020 from 7–9pm as the culminating finished product of the Poetic Ethnography spring semester 2020.

Conclusion

According to Mary Helen Immordino-Yang, “emotions form a critical piece of how, what, when, and why people think, remember and learn.” (Immordino-Yang 2016, 17) Overall, the student work was transformative. Students who were new to either theatre or poetic ethnography, rose to the occasion, putting their best foot forward creating high quality ethnographic work that spoke to their current moment—life in the time of COVID-19 and this unique time of crisis.

As academicians in the US (aside from the unthinkable in the massive disruptions in learning following 9/11, the Virginia Tech incident, and hurricane Katrina for schools and campuses in New Orleans and Texas), fortunately, administrators, faculty and staff have not had to tackle the unimaginable on the scale of the COVID-19 pandemic ever before to this magnitude and to this degree. Yet, just as social-distancing has become a new watchword, *crisis curriculum* or trauma-informed teaching may very well, one day, become a necessary scenario that all faculty may need to think about for one problem or another.

For me, it meant, taking a community-based learning class steeped in cultural ethnographic methods and tied to some of the oldest, components of theatre and performance—the storytelling tradition and poetic verse—coupling it with the latest available technologies (Zoom, smart phones, videography, video-editing platforms, classroom YouTube channels and ‘streaming’ capabilities on platforms like Facebook Live for unlimited distribution and audience access) to make *crisis curriculum* a reality. “As more and more ethnic and urban social research necessitates finding new and creative ways to disseminate data beyond just the usual scholarly community, *performance* is increasingly becoming one of the new, innovative vehicles of choice through which information is distributed to a wider audience.” (Williams-Witherspoon 2015, 39) This work continues to resist the humanities/science duality that seeks to de-value *performed research*. (Rinehart 2018, 1)

With no compromise in academic continuity or learning outcomes, the Poetic Ethnography *crisis curriculum* worked. Two of our class seniors graduated with flying colours and another student, a veteran Slam poet, won a full-ride and fellowship to another writing programme in the Midwest. When asked what she would take with her from this programme, she reported that this class taught her how to focus her writing. A month after the semester ended, she sent me a copy of her book and wrote:

Dear Dr. Kimmika,

Learning from you this semester has been an honor. You challenged me in ways that pushed and inspired me beyond what I thought I was capable of, and because of you my artistry feels more empowered and limitless than ever. Thank you for guiding my hand to reach for the creative band that circles us and to pull from its magic every day. You reminded me how powerful and necessary writing is. How it is as ingrained in our nature as breathing. Having you as a professor allowed me to see myself as a lifelong writer when often I lost my way. I’m immensely thankful for Poetic Ethnography and I have no doubt I will carry your lessons with me to Madison...”

Azura Tyabji

Teaching students interview techniques, how to interrogate multiple data collection methodologies, ethnographic methods, autoethnography and turning poetic ethnography into devised theatre, students in Temple University’s Theater Studies class, THTR 2008 Poetic Ethnography, walk away from this course having learned hands-on writing and performance skills, and, even during a pandemic, create culturally-conscious, socially-relevant *theatre* that not only changes lives, but also disseminates *research*. What more could I ask for?

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