

On Choosing

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Across the street on the steps of the Catholic church, a couple watches me pack up our car. They're sharing a folded slice of pizza on a greasy paper plate.

I'm filing my dirty laundry, a bag of coffee, my work computer, and a suitcase full of sweatshirts into the back seat. Hours from now, we will drive away from New York City in the middle of a global pandemic. We will flee to my in-laws' house in suburban Pennsylvania: empty, because they are taking care of an older family member in Florida. We will be making a choice.

We keep telling ourselves that by taking another chronically ill person out of the equation, we're lessening the potential burden on the hospital system. We're one fewer vector in the grocery store line, one fewer fingerprint on the doorknob. We will say to ourselves that we're mitigating the risk by driving directly to our destination, stopping once, using gloves, staying inside. But we also know that we are leaving because we are scared, and because we can.

We must hold this knowledge in tension with the knowledge that we are handing off our monthly Metrocard at the bodega to someone who took the subway to work today: someone whose family member might also be unusually susceptible. We must hold the hundreds of years that are captured in this exchange: the imperialism, the racism. In the fact of our leaving, in the existence of our suburban Pennsylvania destination, there is this history. In our choice to abandon our temporary city for temporary safety, leaving everyone less safe, there is this history.

When we arrive in the suburbs, we will order contactless delivery and stay inside for two weeks. And there will be a person on the other side of the door: one who might not be able to choose to opt out of the extra cash, one who we are sending into harm's way to pick up our food. Here, again, this exchange will appear. We will buy and eat the food that farmworkers harvested, and that a truck driver brought to

the grocery store, and that the grocery store workers unpacked and shelved and scanned.

Our other choice is to stay in this city and to bear witness to constant sirens. In this alternate reality, we might hang our heads out of our window at 7 p.m. every night and bang on a pot and sing “Stand by Me” to show appreciation for the healthcare workers. We might deliver groceries to our neighbors. And we may feel that merely by the act of staying, we are “proving” our solidarity.

Staying has been posited as the less selfish choice: the one that is not an exercise of privilege. Of course, this is true while it is also untrue. Because in this reality, we would still be one more reason that subway ridership has decreased the most in wealthy neighborhoods and significantly less in poorer ones (Goldbaum and Rogers Cook). We would still endanger grocery store workers who have to bag our groceries behind the plexiglass wall and without the option of taking time off if we make them sick. So, we would still hold the knowledge that while none of us, individually, decided that Tony must keep the laundromat open, and that Lin must drive in from New Jersey and stand at the counter in front of the wall of baby photos and holiday cards waiting for us to bring in our heavy bags of dirty clothes, we have all made this possible. Those of us with the most power have collectively agreed that it is acceptable for us to expose Lin’s older husband to this virus in exchange for clean laundry. We have agreed that there is no other choice, comforting ourselves with the thought that we are “supporting local businesses.”

The choice to leave or to stay is not the same one. Leaving privileges our comfort over the safety of the gas station attendant in New Jersey, and the convenience store worker in Pennsylvania, and all of the many people who came into contact with them. We took precautions, but we could not eliminate the risk. So now, we have to sit with what it means that we might have killed someone, or more than one person, to secure the ability to go outside without needing to carefully measure six feet of distance with every step.

Still, the choice to stay does not change the fact that cafeteria workers were summoned to work at universities weeks after everyone else was allowed to go home, or that some security guards never got to leave. It does not change the conditions under which it has been made possible for people to sleep head to foot in a jail. It does not make social distancing possible in a shelter. Those facts remain.

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The most glaring one of all is this: the labor of pontificating into my computer about disparate power dynamics in the middle of a global pandemic is made possible by the labor of people who we have collectively forced into shouldering incredible risk. The fact of whether or not my agreement is reluctant does not matter. Reluctant agreement paired with gross negligence will kill hundreds of thousands of people.

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In these strange and uniform days, I will think, as I pretend to write my dissertation and to care about things that seem increasingly distant, of the Conference on College Composition and Communication. In 2016, Cs reminded us that language “empowers individuals to explore and change themselves and their worlds” (“Statement on Language”).

I will wonder if part of the problem, all along, is that so many of us have continued to imagine that our job is to teach a good man, speaking well, to explore and change himself and his world.

When Black and Indigenous scholars and community leaders, when disability justice activists, told us about solidarity and care for all beings, decolonization, struggle, resilience, joy, transformative justice, persistence, two-way learning, freedom dreaming, and imagining otherwise, too many of us have continued to imagine the empowerment of individuals instead (Bambara, Cushman, Davis, Gilmore and Kilgore, Kynard, Love, Milbern and Berne, Mingus, Tuck, Tuck and Yang.).

Too many of us imagine that our work is “to [cultivate] thoughtful speakers and writers” rather than to cultivate interdependence and collective responsibility, interrelationality, resistance, antiracism, care, mutuality, and healing. We imagine that our job is to be of service to the students who happen to make it to our classroom. To conduct the research, to publish the essay that will advance our career. To join the taskforce that will ease our mind. To serve those who are able to stay, and to help them to achieve whatever serves their own purposes, even if those purposes are actively making the world a worse place to live.

Punctuated by refrigerated trucks parked outside of hospitals, by makeshift tents in a park only two blocks away from the apartment we abandoned, this moment will reiterate the consequences of individualism paired with disinvestment. It will be characterized by exhausted calls from our healthcare worker friends who had to use the same N-95 mask for three days in a row. And it will be forcefully marked by loss: of connection and routine, of future and life.

Amidst the loss, I will also find potent resiliency. I will meet New Yorkers on Slack channels and on Zoom calls, and we will strategize together about how to get groceries and medications and masks and money delivered to our neighbors. We will use new tools to perform old actions. I will watch people build incredible things to tell each other where to find toilet paper and hand sanitizer and how long the line is at Fairway.

We will freedom-dream—together, apart—in these new and old, distant and close communities, imagining a future without punitive justice and disposability. We will be reminded, again and again, in all of the times when we most need the reminder, that another world is possible. That it is both far away and already here, all at the same time.

And next to the trucks and the tents and the masks and the loss and the calls and the tools and the dreams, it will feel so small to think about the field's future, or my own place within it. The initial task of this essay—documenting our experiences at a conference—will seem so far away. But so will a lot of things. In the face of a coming eviction crisis, while watching my hometown refuse to abide by mask ordinances, while watching my family get sick, while witnessing an unending spectacle of daily cruelties, it will feel so insignificant to mourn the withering job market, and the loss of a kind of certainty. My moral dilemma about whether I can keep teaching students about how to belong to an institution that will love so few of them back will feel quaint. The contradiction between my outrage at the proliferation of the calls for papers about the COVID “moment”—this immediate need to intellectualize and document suffering—and the idea of being the kind of person who will respond to one will feel both consuming and silly.

And at first, worrying about the future of my public university, which educates such a large proportion of our city's essential workers and their children, might also feel small. But then, I will remember that the trucks and the tents and the schools form a more complete story. That the same reasons we require “heroism” from the working-class students of color in my classroom continues to starve their colleges of funding, to increase their enrollment caps, to hike up their tuition, to neglect the filling of their soap dispensers, to police their language and their bodies and their ways of knowing and being. It makes so many of their instructors tourists of their pain, deliverers of their “empowerment,” rather than co-conspirators in their liberation. I will be reminded of the fact that countable deaths among our staff,

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and our students, and our faculty were higher than anywhere in the nation (Valbrun), and that none of this is disconnected from the other parts of it.

May this moment change it. May it be different this time.

May it convince more of us that we will not take apart this world with our individual choices, even though we must commit to making those, too.

May we move beyond “empowerment” as more of us begin to examine how our research, how our conferences, how our hiring processes, how our teaching loads, how our livelihoods, how our institutions are made possible.

Whenever we are in a year, or in ten, or in one hundred, may this moment finally move more of us beyond the “cultivation” of good men speaking well, and toward making inconvenient and uncomfortable and possible choices: individual ones, and ones that we cannot make alone. May more of us finally commit to imagining a world beyond the one where comfort and access for some are privileged over life for so many others.

May we commit to making choices that will bear fruit that we may never get to eat, as so many people have done before us.

And may we do it together, apart.

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