

## *Review Article*

by

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I was very pleased to be asked by the publisher to review a book co-edited by my Brooklyn College colleagues Joseph Entin and Jeanne Theoharis, titled *Until We're Seen: Public College Students Expose the Hidden Inequalities of the COVID-19 Pandemic* (2024). They documented and analysed the first-hand experience of poor and working-class students of colour at our college and at California State University, Los Angeles in *Until We're Seen: Public College Students Expose the Hidden Inequalities of the COVID-19 Pandemic*. I had coauthored, with Judith N. DeSena, *COVID-19 in Brooklyn: Everyday Life During a Pandemic* (Krase and DeSena 2023) that, in contrast, closely examined how the pandemic impacted the lives of much more privileged people living in the super-gentrified Brooklyn neighbourhoods of Park Slope and Greenpoint/Williamsburg. Therefore, I saw this offer as an opportunity for stark comparisons. What I found were more nuanced differences. (See also Krase and DeSena 2020) There are many methodological similarities in both books such as employing autoethnography. Both books also focus on social justice, which closely considers race, ethnicity, and social class issues. However, I would argue that to fully appreciate the lives of disadvantaged individuals and groups sensitively displayed in *Until We're Seen*, one must understand those of the more advantaged people detailed in *COVID-19 in Brooklyn*.

In their edited volume, Entin and Theoharis made note of the sad irony of the elevation of “essential workers” to the status of “heroes” shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic essentially shut down most of New York State after the order of then-Governor Andrew Cuomo on March 15, 2020. The contributions of these neglected “heroes” and their elevated status lasted a while beyond this initial period; even as the shutdown was slowly lifted and finally ended. In our book, we describe how New Yorkers like ourselves came out every evening at 7 PM to noisily thank essential workers. However, as noted by the editors, they have yet to be adequately compensated for their service in the form of higher pay and benefits. Well beyond the crucial medical staff, public order, safety as well as other indispensable government employees, the vast majority of this invaluable heroic army was primarily low-paid, often contingent, employees such as kitchen and warehouse staff and the exploding number of men and women delivering goods, including medicines, during the lockdown and beyond. It must be noted that this inadequately compensated workforce continues to be legion today and that many are undocumented workers.

Entin and Theoharis provided the opportunity to a small sample of their students from these lower socio-economic ranks to tell their own stories about their struggles, their families, their friends, and their neighbours during the pandemic. These poignant accounts are related in their own words and, for the most part, continue to be ignored. As to the format of the volume, each chapter is introduced by one of the students' socially conscious instructors. This insightful

work was initially facilitated by a Social Science Research Council (SSRC) grant that enabled Entin and Theoharis to choose eighteen Brooklyn College students from New York's disadvantaged communities to spend the summer of 2020 researching and writing their own stories. These autoethnographies were later deposited at the Brooklyn Historical Society, the SSRC, and in the Brooklyn College COVID-19 archive. The project was later expanded with twelve more students in January of 2021 and nineteen more in the summer of 2021. Later they also teamed with California State University, Los Angeles Professor Alejandra Marchevsky to include a section of his similar West Coast students' narratives.

These autoethnographies capture the impacts of the pandemic in New York City and Los Angeles on some of the most hard-hit communities over more than two years. Some of the narratives include family and events in Mexico, Pakistan, and Puerto Rico. The twenty-four stories related how people supported each other to survive and keep going during the pandemic.

They are divided into five parts: Essential Work, Disposable Workers; Racism, Family, and Commitments in a Time of Emergency; Crises of Health and Housing; Community Organizing, Mutual Aid, and Struggle; Gender, Sexuality, and Inequality In Los Angeles, and each has several student narratives.

Entin and Theoharis emphasize that such narratives were mostly ignored from the treatment of the pandemic by both mainstream media and academic scholarship. In this regard, I think it prudent to excerpt some poignant examples from the book.

In "Beloved, but Forced to Live and Die in the Shadows" (p. 50), Yamilka Portorreal relates:

"April 10, 2020, marked less than one week until my twenty-first birthday. I was excited to hit this milestone despite the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. I had accepted that I would not be able to celebrate it the way I always wanted to: with a lot of friends. However, I was very grateful that everyone in my immediate family was okay and no one had contracted COVID yet. That afternoon, my grandmother was making coffee when she got a call from an old friend. In hindsight, I was too focused on my chemistry homework to notice her boisterous shock and confusion. I thought one of her distant family members whom I'd never met before had passed away, which is usually the case, but this time it felt different. Her surprise was accompanied by crying.

"He died?!!!!" she exclaimed in Spanish.

As soon as she hung up the phone, she headed in my direction in what felt like light speed. I vividly remember the smell of roasted coffee beans that followed her as she entered my room. "What happened?" I said obliviously. "Leo died!" she exclaimed, as she burst into tears. I felt my heart drop. I was bombarded with feelings of shock, confusion, sadness, and a multitude of questions. "How could it have been possible?! I trusted that he would get better," I thought to myself. Our suspicion of coronavirus was true. Since tests weren't widely available in April, we

had to assume that Leonardo was sick from COVID-19 based on his symptoms of fever and cough. He was also undocumented, which made it challenging for him to seek medical help. It is likely that he never pursued medical assistance for fear of deportation, a dilemma many undocumented people face.”

In “(Need)les and Many Threads: Sewing Community from Pandemic Puerto Rico and Beyond” (p. 163) Daniel J. Vázquez Sanabria writes:

“It was Wednesday, March 11, 2020, when CUNY moved classes online and the uncertainties of the pandemic took over.<sup>1</sup> The retail job I worked in the Kings Plaza mall joined the shutdowns a week later. Suddenly, as a college junior with an almost-maxed-out credit card and growing fears (or panic?) of contracting the virus, I became unemployed. I joined a major economic crisis and those I relied on for help were struggling too.

My sister called over video quite frequently during the early months of the pandemic. She made sure I had everything I needed. During these calls, we talked about everything from Zoom classes to the stories of narrow-minded customers visiting her workplace unconcerned about the growing global alerts. It became clear later that these calls also served as a space for us to connect and support each other. These moments painted a detailed picture of the kinds of *vivencias* this tension-filled time was shaping.

This story is about my sister, who continually builds spaces of care in moments of scarcity. This story is also about a colony, Puerto Rico, and the complications the United States presents for islanders struggling to survive. When a pandemic forces us into precarious conditions and, for those already living precariously, pushes us deeper into desperation, it is often hard to stay oriented, continue producing, and care for ourselves. What happens when resistance takes the form of community building and networks of care?”

In “(Her)story: Retelling, Restitching” *We couldn't wear masks; we couldn't wear glove* (p. 164). Daniel J. Vázquez Sanabria writes:

“Living in Puerto Rico and working in customer service at one of the busiest airports in the archipelago—which my sister was doing before the pandemic hit—was not equivalent to staying indoors and emailing professors, which is what I was doing in New York once CUNY transitioned to online learning. During the late weeks of February of 2020, my sister’s company, like many others, prohibited the use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) in the workplace.<sup>2</sup> Their reasoning against making use of spread-prevention tools was based on their belief that it would create “alterations” to the company’s brand and upset customers. “The customer is always right” meant employees would have to risk contracting a deadly

virus for the sake of pre-serving normalcy for clientele. Profit definitely preceded science. *Eventually . . . they said: "Okay, yes. Now you can wear masks."*

In "Pandemic Deepens Food Inequality in Brooklyn: Live from Bed-Stuy" (p. 187), Khadhazha Welch wrote:

"I don't know, Mommy, I just find it weird that I have to go all the way to Trader Joe's in upscale Brooklyn Heights to find affordable, fresh food just because the grocery store by our house wants to sell us rotten fruits and milk for over eight dollars." It was the only thing I could say on Facetime with my mother as we talked during the peak of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic in Brooklyn. My eyes wandered over \$3 a pound for spoiled grapes and a 30–50% price increase for meat; milk that was once \$3 was now \$8.25. Not being the only one dismayed by the sudden price increases, it wasn't surprising to hear other patrons in the grocery store express their grief with comments such as "Since when does this cost this much?" and "Come on, you know no one is working right now; don't take advantage of the people." Price inflation paired with the rise of unemployment left many Brooklyn residents to make tough choices. Usually, most people were able to note a sudden price increase in produce or dairy with no more than a raised eyebrow and a disgruntled grunt because they knew that a steady flow of income would keep them afloat and make up for the extra money spent. But now, as people lost work during the pandemic, every dollar often counted toward securing meals for themselves and their loved ones, and many residents were left with three options: seek food security within local food pantries, buy less food, or if all else fails, succumb to hunger."

Although many friends and neighbours of more privilege also passed away from COVID-19, the daily burdens we faced were greatly reduced. While we hunkered down during the 2020 lockdown, my co-author and I continued to receive our pay as we worked remotely. We had spacious homes and lived in neighbourhoods with nearby medical facilities. In fact, in our areas, when COVID-19 testing and, later, vaccines became available they were within easy reach at local pharmacies and urgent care facilities. Given our economic advantages, we were able to have all our needs met by the army of warehouse, grocery, and delivery workers who brought them to our doorstep.

As might be expected when competent scholars explore similar topics, there are many important parallels and similarities between the two books. However, as is obvious, I believe the differences are far more important. Although DeSena and I also looked closely at the disadvantaged populations in Brooklyn, we did so through a more distant lens. Our methods were also more multi-modal as we employed direct observations, as well as auto-visual- and other ethnographic methods. We also analysed pandemic-related content on the Internet, especially social media. For example, I noted in the study of my Park Slope neighbours how a Google group was employed to check on our vulnerable neighbours. I should also note the sadness of hearing ambulance sirens at night, and when the lockdown was lifted observing the

refrigeration trucks at a nearby a hospital because their morgue was full. The feelings we privileged people get are not different from those of the less advantaged. The difference is our greater ability to deal with the problems that confront us. Other collectivises also suffered disproportionately such as those in rural areas and the elderly. Of course, in both categories, those persons of colour would have “enhanced” disadvantages.

To place the local in a proper context, we first extensively reviewed and summarized the national and global studies of both the etiology of the virus and the growth of both global and local anti-vax movements. Even more comprehensive information was provided in two *Urbanities* Supplements on the topic: Giuliana Prato’s *City Life and Beyond in Times of Pandemic* (2020) and Italo Pardo and Giuliana Prato’s *Healthcare and Public Health: Questions of Legitimacy* (2022) With words and images, DeSena and I placed our personal experiences inside the broader context of global and national medical emergencies, as well as pandemic-induced unemployment, the Black Lives Matter Movement, and the contentious 2020 presidential election. In addition, we addressed the cultural and economic shifts that took place at the start of the pandemic and contemplated how they might impact how the “new normal” of business, entertainment, education, housing, and work will look like locally and globally.

For both our books, the topic was serendipitous as we all were teaching in person at the onset of the pandemic and switched to remote learning. This led to a better understanding of the relative access to both technology and internet access of more and less privileged students and instructors. Some of Entin and Theoharis’ students could have been my own as I taught remotely at Brooklyn College during this time. I asked my students to write about how they were affected but only summarized their experiences in our book. I believe the contrast provided in these two books is extremely important, because while these stories are seldom told (read) it is only by understanding what could have been that one can appreciate the stark differences.

Readers should be extremely grateful for the work of Entin and Theoharis but even more so what their students themselves revealed. However, the implied premise of their book that seeing the sufferings of their students will motivate social and political change rings hollow to me. For example, I don’t believe that racial and ethnic discrimination is merely a matter of lack of knowledge of the suffering caused by it. As in DeSena and my book which is also framed with the social justice perspective, we hope that our insights will better inform public policies for the next pandemic that is sure to come. In sum, a complete understanding of the COVID-19 phenomena requires a wide range and more focused studies. *Until they see us* and *COVID-19 in Brooklyn* would make perfect both ends of a Global Pandemic bookshelf.

## References

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