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Is Higher Education Learning from the Pandemic?

In a 27 May webinar, Paula Krebs spoke with Cathy N. Davidson (Graduate Center, City University of New York), Alondra Nelson (Social Science Research Council), and Christopher Newfield (University of California, Santa Barbara) about the many challenges colleges and universities are facing while adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic and how the crisis is forcing academia to confront existing structural inequities. Here's some of what they said. Visit the MLA Conversation Series page (mla.org/Conversations) to access a recording of the event.

Alondra Nelson: I want us to be more articulate as teachers about the care work that went into teaching in this moment. . . . Our colleagues who are teaching in this moment worked very hard in the pastoral and vocational sense of their work to make sure their students had an adequate experience and an experience that helped them to make sense of the moment.

Christopher Newfield: I actually see this as an opportunity for us to think through . . . the extent to which the work that contingent faculty [members] do needs to be rewarded with job security in a completely different kind of economic structure.

Cathy N. Davidson: I think that if we don't set a higher ethical standard and scientific standard, then what is higher education for?

AN: There was that moment, particularly in April, where the only information that any of us could get that felt reliable about what was happening to us was from universities. . . . I really do hope

that we can use those opportunities to frame a conversation about the necessary steady state of research and knowledge production that serves us when we need it.



CND: Our students are working toward an education voluntarily, and that to me brings with it both a respect I have for students and a trust in students. . . . I have a feeling that if we trusted students more, we'd be coming up with better solutions to some of the online problems now. And, in fact, if there were a federation of students . . . they would actually be coming up with some pretty great suggestions, and probably more generous and equitable ones than we're seeing right now.

CN: College is the place where the nonmonetary, nonpecuniary value of identity, of thought, of being able to be part of authoring the destiny of the collective is first and foremost. . . . I think liberal arts colleges got that right, and the tragedy of American higher education is the discriminatory and antiegalitarian hoarding of the

best version of what we have, when in fact what we should be doing is figuring out how to massively multiply our funding so that we can bring it to everybody in the society.



PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

What Kind of Future?

Comment on this column at president.mla.hcommons.org.

EVEN BEFORE THE PANDEMIC IT WAS

difficult to address the problems facing our profession—to ensure the well-being of our graduate students, provide access to health care for adjuncts, offer job security for untenured faculty members, and strengthen contingent faculty members' tenuous access to academic freedom. With the pandemic, these problems have only grown more acute as travel ceases, courses can no longer be held in person, university revenues diminish, and budget cutbacks begin. Frankly, it is a terrifying time for PhD students, who face the future as an ever-narrowing horizon. The world we know has drawn to a halt as its structures of power and exclusion start to expose their seams. The structures of racial and class inequality, for instance, that permeate our institutions have only become more visible and, for many, more difficult to deny. On the one hand are administrators eager to reopen the university precisely as it was to secure its revenues; on the other are those who wish to take this occasion to reflect on and reimagine the university as a public good, as a place where social inequalities can be addressed and overcome.

Those who wish to restart the university have sought to confront the effects COVID-19 will have on their faculty members, students, staff members, and other workers. Universities that insist on opening in the fall even with social-distance protocols in place cannot fully acknowledge the risk they take in possibly assisting the spread of the virus and disenfranchising those who can neither teach nor learn under conditions that may well be hazardous to their health.

They have calculated, whether consciously or not, that a certain amount of illness and death will be acceptable. Can they give us that number? Will those who fall ill or die be the people of color and working-class migrants who compose their cleaning and maintenance staff, their kitchen staff? Or will it be the lecturers, who cover about seventy-two percent of all college teaching but are often denied the right to health insurance because their teaching load is restricted to less than fifty percent? Or faculty members and students with autoimmune diseases or preexisting conditions, or those who are older?

reopening change were we to start with the public good as a more important value than those generated by market reasoning alone?

In the humanities, we ask how values operate within language, how worlds open and close within a text or image or performance, how the future is constrained by the visual lens through which one sees. But life and death have also always been our themes, and now a new question emerges for all members of our communities: What obligation do we have to sustain one another's lives? The communities of care emerging among graduate students during this pandemic

“We all surely wish to keep the university alive, but is this not a moment to think creatively and critically about which form of the university should come into being?”

We all surely wish to keep the university alive, but is this not a moment to think creatively and critically about which form of the university should come into being? By what principles should it be governed? Can the university now be renewed with a commitment to expanding its curriculum to reflect the diversity of our social world and to ground its aim in principles of social justice and the public good? Will we continue to insist on budgets that bloat administrative salaries rather than give graduate students a living wage and secure health care for all? How would our deliberations about

model thinking and writing in the context of caring for life. A public disassembled into solitudes turns to art and story, to viewing public art and theater online, exchanging poems over e-mail, writing collaboratively, establishing dialogues between humanists and scientists, experimenting with digital forms. Reading a novel, we often ask about its protagonist, What kind of life is this? And if that character dies, what sequence of events led to the conclusion of this life? Was it fate or the effect of social forces that could have been averted? The entire public now asks that question as

it fathoms the brutal killing of George Floyd and the long list of Black lives extinguished by police violence.

How to understand and mark such a loss of life, linked as it is with so many losses? This question we ask in literature as in life. The very same Black community that is mourning the loss of lives from COVID-19 that could have, and should have, been treated and saved suffers a series of brutal and violent losses at the hands of the police. Police violence that takes Black life works in tandem with health-care systems that let Black people die without proper

care. It is *systemic* racism that links the two. How best, then, to rethink the university against this death dealing? Is this not our chance?

To those in a rush to reopen the university to save its future, we must ask, What kind of future do you have in mind? Shall faculty members and students have a say in that future? In our field of work, we constantly engage with imaginary worlds that refract the societies in which we live, tasked with fathoming lost or future worlds by texts that both claim our attention and let our minds wander. We cannot subscribe to the false and

manic optimism of the market and its speculations as the only way to “save” the university, since once those values reign, we will have lost the battle. We speculate in the name of another set of values. And as those who work together in institutions, we affirm the chance to make a habitable world for living beings who are too familiar with having their lives stolen or their dreams extinguished. Our task, then, is to draw the contours of a future collaboratively, an imaginary for the living with the power to become our world.

Judith Butler

Anti-Asian Racism, COVID-19, and Being an Antiracism Educator

I am the daughter of a refugee father from China and an immigrant mother from Jamaica whose parents were themselves immigrants from Hong Kong. I have listed this on every professional bio since February 2017 (see, e.g., www.colorado.edu/cha/about/administration/jennifer-ho), when the forty-fifth president of the United States tried to ban people of Muslim faith from entering this country. I begin with this statement of origins for many reasons, both political and personal, but professionally this part of my background is just as important as my PhD in English. My knowledge of Asian American literature and culture and of critical race theory came both through the many works I've read and through the experience of living in a body that is marked as Asian, and not so parenthetically I will add cisgender female and able-bodied, since I also know the ways that my intersecting subjectivities guide how I experience the world and how the world experiences me.

One way the world experiences me in the midst of COVID-19 is as contagion and threat. The coronavirus has become metaphorically linked to all things perceived to be Chinese. Chinese in the United States have long been linked to disease, which is why the anti-Asian vio-

lence that has risen rapidly in the wake of the global pandemic is not surprising to me. Sadly, there is a long, bloody history of scapegoating Asians during times of tension. And as all of you reading this newsletter know, words matter.

So it matters when someone uses the phrase *Chinese virus*, not just because it's not the official name designated by the World Health Organization but because this kind of rhetoric fuels anti-Asian harassment and violence. Which is why I created a PowerPoint slide deck to talk about anti-Asian racism and COVID-19 (and why my university, the University of Colorado, Boulder, turned it into a Web page and sharable PDF [forms.gle/34TqS1CZijweXED77; www.colorado.edu/asmagazine/2020/04/08/anti-asian-racism-and-covid-19]). I had wanted to take seriously and act generously toward questions I kept seeing on the news and social media, in late March, about why the phrase *Chinese virus* was racist. I wanted to educate people about the history of anti-Asian racism in the United States and to make clear that the phrase isn't being used innocently but as a rhetorical weapon to blame China as a nation and by extension anyone who is Chinese or perceived to be Chinese.

I'm under no illusion that a slide deck will end anti-Asian racism. But I am hoping that all of you can help. Because the only thing you need to be an antiracism educator and ally is the will to do so. And we desperately need antiracism educators. Ahmaud Arbery. Breonna Taylor. George Floyd. If you don't recognize these names, please look them up. It may seem to be a strange pivot to go from anti-Asian racism linked to COVID-19 to African Americans recently murdered by the police, but all of this is connected. You cannot stand up against anti-Asian racism now if you aren't already standing up against anti-Black racism. Words matter—let's use ours to educate our family, friends, neighbors, colleagues, and students into being antiracism allies and educators.

Jennifer Ho, in addition to being the daughter of a refugee father and immigrant mother, is the director of the Center for Humanities and the Arts and professor of ethnic studies at the University of Colorado, Boulder, and the author of three books, including Racial Ambiguity in Asian American Culture (Rutgers UP, 2015). She is also president of the Association for Asian American Studies.

Intentional Remote Teaching

The spring of 2020 will likely be remembered by teachers everywhere as the most difficult period in their professional lives. Now that the dust has settled from the spring of 2020, and as we prepare ourselves for the coming challenges of our fall semesters, I ask my colleagues to take a moment to try viewing online education and remote teaching from a different perspective.

I know many faculty members and students alike are not sold on the strengths of remote teaching, but what many experienced in the spring was triage rather than the kind of carefully planned-out courses that those of us who have already been teaching online create with surgical precision. Remote teaching, like all instruction, needs to be intentional, not rushed. We need to look at what works in remote instruction and employ backward design rather than expect our face-to-face methods to be successful online. After all, what is effective in a graduate seminar of ten students will not work in an undergraduate lecture hall of four hundred students.

As I collaborated with many faculty members over the past few months, both at my institution and beyond, the comments I heard most were that remote teaching made interaction with students more difficult and that it limited student engagement. While I understand how this could be the case for teachers new to remote learning, I find that I actually have more one-on-one interaction with my distance learners than with the students I teach in person, and, by using technology that my students are familiar with and can easily access, I rarely struggle with student engagement.

I construct a class by assigning a few texts for the students to read on their



own before they watch a short, asynchronous video in which I discuss the texts they have read. After they watch the video, they take a quiz or contribute to a discussion board. I repeat this format two or three times per week in each class so that the material is organized in manageable sections with obvious stopping points, much as it is in a class that meets two or three times per week. Since the videos are recorded and uploaded to *YouTube* ahead of time, and the amount of time I spend in the classroom is reduced, I can devote more time to conferencing with students by video chat or cell phone. (To protect my “real” phone number, I give them an alternative one, often through Google Voice.) This not only allows for more one-on-one interaction, but it also allows students to contact me when it is convenient for them. With no set meeting time, they can reach out when a question arises rather than wait until the next class. My students are also comfortable doing tasks on their cell phones, and many of them tell me they can watch my videos

anywhere—on the bus, for instance, or in line at the grocery store. The material is therefore accessible to all students of all learning types, including those whose jobs or other responsibilities would make it hard to follow a fixed class schedule.

I create my videos to address the concepts I want my students to understand but without giving away what they are expected to have learned through the reading, which encourages them to do more of the work than I often find they do in my face-to-face sections. I will add that I wear neutral clothing and don’t discuss anything but the class in these videos so there are no indications of when the videos were made. When an online course is designed with the necessary time and intention, there is no reason that it cannot be as successful as a course that is offered face-to-face.

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COVID-19 and the Cost of Ageism

We've been counting it a blessing that COVID-19 mostly leaves kids alone. It isn't. Our ageism values the young over the old so much that a youth-killing plague could have galvanized the United States and resulted in not only far fewer deaths overall but perhaps even, paradoxically, fewer deaths of children and young adults. Instead, the perceived safety of younger people and our ageist priorities are exacerbating this humanitarian disaster.

"Interrupting and postponing the education of tomorrow's leaders," Purdue University's president, Mitchell E. Daniels, Jr., suggests, is a cost we should stop paying—after all, COVID-19 "poses close to zero lethal threat" to those under thirty-five. The ageism underpinning Daniels's statement and inaccurate risk assessment has shaped much of our pandemic response. We expect plagues to hit infants and the very old. When the young die we write it up as an extraordinary and unnatural tragedy. That such deaths from coronavirus are rare

unenviable decline has embedded ageism throughout our society. Daniels, Patrick, and Shapiro merely voice a tacit consensus. And despite the internalized ageism of his statement, Patrick at least identifies himself as belonging to the category he is jeopardizing. Our culture discourages us from identifying ourselves as "old" or "elderly." As the virus spread, that age misalignment led us—including our disproportionately elderly policy makers—to downplay personal risks.

The same distortions appear writ large in our media coverage and our health-care priorities. We focus our horrified attention on the overwhelmed hospitals, where people in their youth, middle age, and early old age are ending up. We focus, too, on the hospitals' need for personal protective equipment and testing. But where I am in Massachusetts, the majority of our reported deaths have been older adults in long-term-care facilities, a statistic that tracks with recent numbers from Europe ("COVID-19 Dashboard" 8, 11, and 15; Kluge). (The United

We can be glad that children and young adults are mostly safe. We can do that without placing their—our, I suppose, since I am thirty—imagined bright futures above others' lives. But unless we confront our bias it will add thousands more lives, old and young, to the toll before this pandemic is over.

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“. . . if the demographics were flipped, we may well have reacted quickly and boldly enough to forestall the pandemic entirely.”

has been met with relief, and older adults have been explicitly written off as disposable—Texas Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick, for example, announced that he and other grandparents would be willing to risk their own death for their grandchildren's economic prospects. Ben Shapiro added that "if this were killing children, everyone would be in lockdown forever."

On the contrary: if the demographics were flipped, we may well have reacted quickly and boldly enough to forestall the pandemic entirely. We are still less alarmed and grieved, less committed to ending this pandemic, than we would be if it had any other demographic distribution. Our rhetoric positioning children and college students as the future, youth as the best stage of life, and old age as

States lagged in reporting coronavirus deaths in nursing homes [Romero et al.].) Eighty-five percent of those who died from COVID-19 in Massachusetts were age seventy or older ("COVID-19 Dashboard" 11). Nonetheless, health-care centers created coronavirus-specific clinical protocols for children and adults before they did so for older adults. Where *The New England Journal of Medicine* aggregates COVID-19 studies online, there are as of this writing five age-specific articles on the main Web page, not one of which addresses older adults. Instead, they discuss children and adolescents in China and Singapore, miscarriage, breastfeeding, strokes in young adults, and multisystem inflammatory disease in children ("Coronavirus").