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Message from the Professor

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Message from the Professor: A Heart-Centered and Community-Based Experience

Karín Aguilar-San Juan

Welcome! You are in the presence of a remarkable and hard-won outcome of Fall 2020: a complete volume of *Tapestries*, a digital undergraduate journal from Macalester College. Every year since its inception, *Tapestries* has featured the work of Macalester students in a free, open-access, digital format. In this volume, you will find the written work of seven college seniors who seek a bachelor's degree in American Studies; their capstone essays manifest days, weeks, months, and years of critical thinking, scholarly research, and personal reflection. The topics are wide-ranging, most of them associated with the overall theme of "care work." They are even more thought-provoking once you dig into the surprising web of associations that lie beneath, tiny mycelium-like networks that lead to paths of fascinating and compelling questions. The essays are exceptional also because of the precarious, unusual, and indeed traumatic conditions in which they were conceived, written, peer reviewed, revised, formatted, and produced.

Precarious, unusual, and traumatic. I am referring, of course, to the global COVID19 pandemic that collided with another pandemic of anti-Black police brutality. We are still living through all of this, combined with the intense local and international

responses.¹ In the months from March to December 2020, students and professors--at Macalester and in every campus around the world where the pandemic has required physical distancing--navigated "Zoom University," on-line classes demanding unprecedented hours of screen time but without the spontaneity or physical companionship usually associated with the college experience.² In this setting, Zoom paired with negative feelings of isolation, exhaustion, overwhelm, fear, uncertainty. It was rare to feel light-hearted and more common to feel the dragging weight of loss. A wide and open view of life was replaced by a limited screen view. Without meaning or wanting to make the shift, we often slipped from "Learning Brain" into "Survival Brain."³ Throughout 2020, one bad thing piled on top

¹ From January 18 to February 6, 2021, an international commission made up of highly esteemed lawyers and experts will convene hearings on systemic racism and police violence in the United States. The report they produce will be submitted to the United Nations Human Rights Council. See Shenoy, Rupa. "International lawyers and activists organize independent inquiry into U.S. police violence," *The World*, December 14, 2020.

<https://www.pri.org/stories/2020-12-14/international-lawyers-and-activists-organize-independent-inquiry-us-police>

² Lorenz, Taylor et al. "We Live in Zoom Now." *New York Times* online, March 17, 2020.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/17/style/zoom-parties-coronavirus-memes.html>

³ Dr. Jacob Ham coined the term "survival brain" to capture the state of mind when someone is traumatized, closed off to exploration and ambiguity. What do we learn when we are closed off in this way? Dr. Jacob Ham. "Understanding Trauma: Learning Brain versus Survival Brain." July 25, 2017 Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KoqaUANgvpA>

of another. As Adelaide Gaughran-Bedell wrote in a reflection about the writing journey: “This year has been one giant hellstorm of beginning, middles, and ends - just all in the wrong order.” In retrospect, it seemed we never had a second to recover before the next bad thing happened.

Once in a while during class, we shared happy moments. The relief was tangible, fleeting and hyperlocal: a new kitten, a birthday, the heartfelt kindness of others at a pop-up mutual aid station, an unexpected visit from a friend, or a delicious meal lovingly made at home by a roommate or parent.

America 2020

Our tumultuous situation was and continues to be a microcosm of a much larger, still unfolding pandemic experience that spans the world. The honest truth is we were mostly buffeted from the worst consequences by having a plentiful supply of clean and hot water, safe housing, and fresh food among the many other resources and amenities available to us on a daily basis.⁴ Still, we struggled with the dangerous national politics of a rabidly racist White House and the wishy-washy yet increasingly hypocritical and militarized

⁴ When I think of “hellstorms” I think about my second cousin, Tala M.V. Roque, a junior at the University of the Philippines, Diliman. The entire city of Metro Manila has been under various forms of militarized lockdown (General Community Quarantine) since March 2020, resulting in widespread unemployment. Tala has managed her way through the academic semester, but her classmates have experienced devastating typhoons, floods, lack of internet service, depression, and joblessness. Some have quit school entirely. Her professors have threatened to strike, and their pay has been withheld by the administration. Students like Tala go to class to make sure that their professors will be able to keep their jobs.

stances of Minnesota’s governor, not to mention the leaders of the cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul. We did not expect the 2020 national and local elections to usher in a whole new world, although we endeavored to be hopeful and to participate in whatever change U.S. electoral politics might make possible. The week of New Year’s Eve, Minneapolis police killed a Somali man, the second Black man killed by police since George Floyd and in the same part of the city.

Rage and sadness were palpable and explicit dimensions of America 2020, fueling our responses to and analyses of key sources on democracy and culture. The first key source was an essay simply titled “[Democracy](#)” by the poet/critic Fred Moten. Our second source was the podcast series “[Dolly Parton’s America](#)” featuring interviews with and commentaries on the singer/pop icon.⁵ Our third source was the book [We Demand: The University and Student Protests](#) by Roderick Ferguson, past president of the American Studies Association (we read the Introduction and Conclusion). Below, I curated a student dialogue on democracy before and after the 2020 elections. The “dialogue” occurred in bits and pieces over Google and Moodle and Zoom, and was sustained over the weeks of late October through early November 2020. The members of the Senior Seminar responded in writing to the readings, to each other, and to prompts I offered regarding current events. If comments are unsigned, it’s not because people are

⁵ I am grateful to the playwright Alice Tuan for directing me to this fun and fantastic podcast.

afraid to reveal themselves; it's because in the moment it was more important to give appreciation for each other's ideas and to advance the conversation rather than to claim a particular point of view as one's own or to campaign for a certain position.

Q1. What did you take away from Prof. Moten's essay, "Democracy"?

ARIEL: Who controls democracy? Democracy definitely seems much more like a buzz word than an actual system. In America it seems to be co-opted by liberals... there is no integrity or liberation connected to it... Democracy relates a lot to respectability politics in my mind, to engage within the system you must adhere to codes and structures that are ... upheld by a majority of people.

ADELE: We are only a couple days away from the U.S. presidential election. It is a tiresome tradition here, and although it will only be my second time voting, I hear, see, read, and even participate in the same conversations surrounding it. Is it worth it to vote? Does my vote matter? What does it mean to vote for "the lesser of two evils"? What does a democracy really mean, and what does it require? Each year we rehash the same arguments without realizing liberatory ideas that were conceptualized years ago, such as Du Bois' "black reconstruction of democracy in America." One idea that

stuck out to me in Moten's writing is the idea that "elections in the United States are meant, finally and above all, to demonstrate that an election took place." They perpetuate the same system of representation that "intervenes between the commons and authority" while performing a false illusion of public voice. What are we doing to rupture what separates us from our collective authority?

MADDIE: Reading this piece by Professor Moten just before the election, and after a long year of constant national focus on the election and voting, this quote spoke to what I've seen throughout all of these electoral discussions: "Thus, U.S. democracy is, on the one hand, what exists now as crisis management and, on the other hand, the set of acts, dispositions, improvisations, collectivities, and gestures that constitute and will have constituted the crisis."

After a year of a global pandemic and uprisings demanding racial justice, it was encouraging to see more radical ideas begin to be accepted about the state of our government and democracy, but as the months went on, I saw many people citing these events as reasons to go vote at all costs and remove Trump from office, to manage the crisis, to fix the broken system. But while voting is important, the Biden

administration (if it happens) will never fundamentally fix the broken system because it's working in the way it was created, this crisis has never not been happening. And I think that's the key misunderstanding of Democrats who decry "young leftists that may not/won't vote" or who happen to criticize Biden at all is that while we understand there are parts of the crisis that can be managed by electing Biden, the crisis itself is built into our democracy, and will never be fixed with electoral politics, will never get us to a government of cooks. The majority of what is "broken" of our system will persist through a Biden administration and this time we will be trying to combat it without the help of the Democrats, and even some Republicans, who resisted Trump so hard in part because he was bold enough to state some of the worst parts of our society and government out loud.

ADELAIDE: In tenth grade, my US History professor made two columns on the board, red and blue. In red she wrote the words *Communism* and *Dictatorship*, in blue she wrote *Capitalism* and *Democracy*... That feels like the base layer of imperialism. The fact that a group of fifteen-year-olds are having their brains filled with this idea: US = right, non-Western/non-capitalist countries

= wrong. That the United States is a democracy. Not only does the United States point to electoral politics time and time again to claim superiority, but "the United States is democracy's unique and solitary home and that the nation has the right and duty violently to export what it calls democracy." How does basing our morality in electoral politics, in ballot boxes, rather than community building and mutual aid breed colonialism and imperialism?

SOPHIA: [T]his article does an effective job of explaining and analyzing the concept of democracy within American culture and how it has been restructured to benefit and maintain oppressive social constructions. For example, I've been noticing many news articles with headlines that read that an elderly individual waited in line to vote for 5+ hours or so, followed by "this is democracy" or "heartwarming story." [These stories] do not explain...how voting suppression is a form of violence for marginalized communities. Democracy in the U.S. has been misconstrued and misrepresented within the nation's history that oppressive acts such as voter suppression and police violence have become normalized to fit the American narrative. How do we get the American public to "unlearn" the modern definition of democracy and work towards democratic values?

CLEVELAND: ...[E]lections are a performance to prove that the US is a democracy when it is not... I don't believe genuine (non-performative, permanent) change happens from the inside of an oppressive system. Changing the figurehead of an oppressive system does nothing. This essay also talked about democracy, meaning the people control the commons. [L]ibraries and parks and shelters and gathering places ... [are] important common spaces that meet people's basic needs ... When a crisis means that people can no longer access [those] spaces... it is clear that the public does not control the commons. How do we talk about commons and control of commons on stolen land? What does a true democracy look like? In what ways have past fascist governments similarly been disguised as democratic or otherwise not fascist? Will this week's election results lead to large scale action against the US government?

Q2. Take a look at the insights, examples, and connections offered above, especially in relation to the upcoming elections. Give props to each other, and if you feel inspired, say more.

I love “performing a false illusion of public voice” that Addie wrote. I am so sick of the shaming, performance, idolization, and capitalism that upholds the ritual of elections. I really resonated

with Maddie’s reflection as well, as we know the two options don’t give much difference in what the outcomes will be.

Ariel [makes] the connection between the modern notion of “democracy” and respectability politics... The media and education has played a significant role in the distortion and misrepresentation of what democracy is. For example, the Boston Tea Party of the American Revolution is considered a significant and revered historical event, yet modern-day rioting and looting has been widely criticized and condemned.

I’ve been thinking a lot about what Sophia brought up in her response. Early voting in this election has been off the charts, we are seeing articles about it everywhere - photos of people waiting in long lines - driving nine hours to the polls - “hero stories” ... What this says to me above all else is that the United States system of “democracy” of “giving the people a voice” is dependent on voter suppression. We simply do not have the capacity for people to vote. Our democracy is entirely dependent on voter suppression of BIPOC communities.

Adelaide's post really resonated with my own experiences through learning and unlearning the concepts of democracy, capitalism, and communism in both formal and informal contexts.

The first time I heard the word communist was when someone told me that Shel Silverstein was a communist in a tone that made his picture on the back of all his books look almost menacing. Everyone in my life or school talked around the concept of communism, only emphasizing how bad or ineffectual it was, in comparison to our perfect American system. Especially leading up to the election, conversations with my parents and others their age have really highlighted to me how much of Red-Scare era fear and justification for imperialism has been deeply ingrained and passed on through our generations and education system, and how some negatively claim that colleges and universities are responsible for radicalizing students, when it often may be the first time people are exposed to alternate possibilities and futures.

Addie brought up this question: “What are we doing to rupture what separates us from our collective authority?” and I think this is a really helpful way of framing resistance, not needing to create some new power or authority but removing the barriers we have to accessing the collective authority we already have. I also appreciated what Maddie wrote: “the crisis itself is built into our democracy” because this also speaks to the idea that resistance is about removing barriers. Part of the

reason that police abolition seems so radical to a lot of people is that there are these constant constructed crises that are created to justify continued violence and oppression. Resistance doesn't have to be about finding new ways to solve these crises, it can be about abolishing the sources of these crises. Adelaide's post talked about both propaganda (learning what forms of government are “good” or “bad” and that the existing system is “good”) and colonialism, the way that we violently enforce our “good” system. There are so many layers of education that teach us to accept US systems as they are and try to hide or justify their violence. Adelaide asks: “If we placed our trust in community organizing, in mutual aid, in those around us - could colonialism still prevail?” This is a complicated question and I don't have an answer but I do think that community organizing is sort of inherently about self determination. Self-determination and colonialism seem at odds in my mind.

Q3: It's after Election Day, and it looks like Biden will win, although the actual count still needs to be finalized. What's on your mind?

ADELAIDE: “This is what democracy looks like!” - hundreds gather on the highway, chanting this. It feels a bit fruitless to over analyse protest chants when direct action often feels like a balm to the wishing and washing of

academia; but, here we are. What does democracy look like? Is democracy the people in the streets or the cops surrounding them, outnumbering them five to one. We are told that democracy means free speech, but the only "democracy" I have ever seen is this one, the one kettling peaceful protesters two nights in a row, murdering and defending the murder of Black bodies. Perhaps we are not fighting for a democracy, perhaps we have one - if so, what is it that we are fighting for? What can take us a step further than democracy?

CLEVELAND: I have been feeling very numb and very useless, pretty burnt out from school...It's frustrating being really angry at how things are going right now ... Having to balance my power and ability to protest and do mutual aid work and otherwise resist, plus having everything shrouded in this nihilistic hopelessness, is really really challenging. A friend posted this podcast (transcript below): <https://truthout.org/audio/reclaiming-possibility-a-rant-against-despair/> and I haven't listened to all of it but I'm planning to, it's about imagination and protest. In terms of exceptionalism, I've been thinking about how important it is for me to consider history outside of the US. I think this will help me fight the hopelessness feelings a bit. People have overthrown governments before

and otherwise resisted oppression. And I'm trying to stay focused on local things and mutual aid...

Q4: What did you learn about student protests from Prof. Ferguson's book on student protests?

ADELE: I'm thinking about this passage about the university: "You and I are the children of this institutional inheritance, the beneficiaries of a history that—as far as this place is concerned—has always presumed the inferiority of various constituencies of "the people" ... And so we find ourselves in institutions that—for the most part—have never cared to fully imagine us" (p. 84). I think it's really important to see ourselves as implicated in all forms of oppression. Essentially all of us are marginalized in some ways and not in others (though we do not all experience oppression in the same ways or to the same extent), and in those instances where we think we're "safe" because of privileges we have to understand we're not safe at all. We are not fully imagined as people when we participate in the oppression of others at any level. It obstructs us from caring for others and being cared for.

Q5: Does Dolly Parton have something to teach us?

Her music is powerful because it was open to interpretation... One idea that I

liked was the notion of a “third space” - that a relationship between two things creates something entirely new. When we are asked to analyze texts we wonder if our (or our teachers) interpretations align with what the author intended - especially when in academia interpretation is often presented as fact. I found this podcast to be a very interesting example of the kind of work that American Studies does as a kind of investigative practice and some of the liberatory? (not exactly) work that is accomplished when you do maybe project meaning. And in another sense how relationships to a text may change over time, and how meaning making can be reflective of a period of time: two of the podcast guests [found] queer themes vs. Nelson Mandela’s playing of “Jolene” on Robben Island, reflecting anticipatory and fearful feelings that manifested for different reasons in the guards and the prisoners.

America 2020: it put us through the wringer and to the extent that we survived, it was not all doom and gloom. To envision that truth, it helps to be blind. Moten’s essay praises the sightless singer, Ray Charles, for seeing “shades of red and blue that are wholly outside the spectrum of intellectual and pseudointellectual democratic management...” Quoting Al Sharpton, Moten writes that “[Charles]’ blindness is the condition of possibility of a rendition of [“America the](#)

[Beautiful”](#) that is at every moment infused with phonographic insight and foresight.”⁶ The song as Charles performs it exudes hope and promise for the land and the people--indeed, for all of us.

Perhaps you are concerned that one man’s brilliant voice is not enough to clear the dense fog of 2020? As luck would have it, two of our solar system’s largest planets--Jupiter and Saturn--aligned in a “Great Conjunction” on December 21, 2020. According to astrological science, this massive planetary line-up signals positive changes in technology, innovation, and community care. We’ll be moving into a new phase, a new era, featuring the Age of Aquarius which translates to freedom from traditional, hierarchical structures of oppression.

As for the [Age of Aquarius](#), bring it on Celia Cruz: La Reina de la Salsa!⁷

Senior Seminar: “Reflective, Compassionate, Culminating”

As professors, we did our best to respond to the upside-down world of 2020 by teaching with care and awareness. It wasn’t easy and we didn’t always do such a great job. We were often more tied to “getting things

⁶ “America the Beautiful” performed by Ray Charles in 1991 at the McCallum Theater in Palm Desert, California. Uploaded by ubbigubbi.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H7-rMb-CtDY>

⁷ “CELIA CRUZ Acuario Aquarius” performed in 1970.

Uploaded by Antonio Lloret. Licensed by: UMG (on behalf of Fania); LatinAutorPerf, SOLAR Music Rights Management, LatinAutor - SonyATV, UNIAO BRASILEIRA DE EDITORAS DE MUSICA - UBEM, LatinAutor - Warner Chappell, Sony ATV Publishing, and 3 Music Rights Societies.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TWnr28D0e0U>

done” than in allowing space and time to connect, digest, process what was actually going on. Our own habits as more established scholars--to use our minds to navigate difficulty and complexity--sometimes aggravated the sense of pain and loss for young scholars who cried out for more embodied, heart-centered actions. Our institutions, too, place emphasis on doing rather than being: finishing homework and grading papers is our default activity rather than reflecting and parsing through the emotional and relational aspects of our situation.

While I cannot take credit for the essays that fill these pages, I do take full responsibility for the American Studies Senior Seminar Fall 2020 Module 2 syllabus which structured the underlying learning, research, and writing experience. Using my fifteen-week syllabus from 2019 as a draft, I re-engineered a shortened seven-point-five-week module experience in a virtual setting. Following the principles of trauma-informed pedagogy, the syllabus emphasized reflection and compassion. We divided our zoom class period into segments, and videos-off was always an option. We live in a punishment-oriented surveillance state, and allowing people to turn off their video while on zoom is an act of care and kindness. During the first segment, we usually said hello, checked in, did a grounding meditation, and played with fill-in-the-blank prompts and fun icebreakers that lightened the mood and helped us get to know each other better. Fill in the blank: “The day learned to...” (This brought

up learning to whistle, to touch type, to assert myself, to cook, to ride a bike, and to drive a car.) Or: “If you were an animal for a day, which would it be?” (This brought up pandas, dolphins, dinosaurs, and something at the bottom of the sea.)

We spent the next hour off-line or in small groups, using a shared worksheet on google docs to report in, reflect, or write in response to a reading or a prompt. The last half hour we came back together on zoom to share or talk together. By breaking up the class period in this way, our zoom time together was less exhausting and more of something people could look forward to because they could connect to each other as friends and peers. Our emphasis was on community-building and relationships. Meeting together regularly also helped to mark time, which can be difficult because the pandemic has stripped us of so much of the movements and physical routines that make the hours and days pass by.

At the start of the module, we spent a lot of time re-orienting ourselves toward reflection and compassion. We talked about and tried to actively disavow the cold-and-calculating achievement mentality, the competitive-individualist mode that “good students” and “good citizens” have integrated into our souls. For too many students, the phrase “good writing” is negatively loaded, the result of years of receiving papers marked up with red ink and tagged with a grade that conveys a crushing message: “Not Good Enough.” As one student so frankly put it in our zoom chat: “[I] come to class with

baggage about college writing; [I'm] trying to experiment with not feeling worse; [I'm looking for] methods of writing where i don't feel actively bad. I'm not shooting for 'amazing'."

Is it any wonder that the very mention of a "culminating" experience--as in the senior capstone project--brings feelings of dread and insecurity?

COVID Capstones: Reflections on the Writing Journey

Despite the dread and insecurity, the capstone project somehow remains what every student expects from the American Studies Senior Seminar. In past years, I tried to make the capstone project an optional or at least a smaller component of the seminar, but there is something like a feeling of letdown or "being cheated" that prevents students from embracing this option. It turns out that the capstone project--for all its negative and scary connotations at the start--also comprises a Landmark Event that brings relief and pride upon completion. So the pedagogical question for me in 2020 was: How to craft a Landmark Event during COVID that would not traumatize or inflict more pain on top of the incredible stress, loneliness, and uncertainty that students would already be facing?

My solution was to embed into the seminar three hour-long sessions of a "Heart-Centered Writing Workshop" led by Professor Claudette Webster, a poet, writing instructor, and fellow Buddhist practitioner

based in the Twin Cities. She enabled the conversion of a great-sounding idea about "writing from the heart" into an actual, live-on-zoom experience geared for American Studies seniors. Prof. Claudette invited students to write about what they really feel about their lives, government, the pandemic, and school. She made herself available to discuss a host of heart-felt and pressing questions: How do you deal with writer's block? How do you mesh the personal with the academic? How do you prepare for the moment when strangers you have never met will read your work? Over and over, she reinforced the concept of "heart-centered writing" by giving people permission to "write for yourself," "write about what's going on," "tell your truth," "say what you actually want and value." At one point, Ariel Hasak-Lowy noticed (and I paraphrase from notes and memory here) that writing from the heart means that "I can bring together what I understand from experience and what I am learning from others."

It was not easy to embrace the idea of writing for ourselves as opposed to others. Too often our listening and habits of mind are tuned into what others expect of us, and our motivation for writing becomes extrinsic rather than intrinsic. But Professor Claudette gently opened a door, inviting each writer to find their own internal guide or anchor. The invitation was received as a loving boost at a time when the question "What does it mean to be a student during COVID?" readily evoked fear, exasperation, and stuckness: "I can't do anything! School or anything else!" While

those feelings continue to be real and vivid in this moment, it is also the case that by opening the door to personal issues, concerns, and experiences, the Heart-Centered Writing Workshop helped people find their voice and gave them energy to express themselves verbally in class and textually on the digital page.

For examples to follow, Prof. Claudette pointed to an entire universe of writers and writing typically described as “non-academic” despite the fact of a close relation with facts, research, and scholarship. These “braided essays” include: “Reflections on Whiteness as Property” by Cheryl L. Harris; “Time and Distance Overcome” by Eula Biss; and “A Braided Heart: Shaping the Lyric Essay” by Brenda Miller. Deciding how and where to share from one’s self and heart is an intricate and weighty matter; in these examples, getting personal in no way diminishes the substance, elegance, or truth of the writing.

The long journey toward this final product was further enriched by zoom visits from two Macalester research librarians, Dave Collins and Louann Terveer. During each visit, Dave and Louann instructed us in the implications and logistics of open-access publishing. For example, did you realize that the resources for scholarly research are not distributed equally across the globe?⁸ How many of us are aware that beside the intellectual content and mentoring, researchers also need material resources?

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<https://theconversation.com/its-time-to-redraw-the-worlds-very-unequal-knowledge-map-44206>

While the example Louann offered here relates to narrowly defined scientific research, it is also true that the technology, finances, and even mechanical aspects of research and publishing in the humanities and social science fields are also skewed toward the Global North, particularly the United States. Making it possible for Macalester undergraduates to publish their work in *Tapestries* is, of course, partly a manifestation of that inequality; and it is also a way to make their cutting-edge research more widely available to others. It is a subtle and important gesture toward flattening the intellectual playing field.

Our librarian colleagues met us with minds and hearts wide open. Their generosity and insight was incredibly fruitful for us. For example, when they explained the various components of an article (the essay itself plus the title, abstract, key words, the author’s professional name, and a short biography), the question came up “[Through our *Tapestries* essays] what things are we leading other people to think about?” This led to a rich conversation about the purpose of research, the peer review process, and feeling “nerve wracked” to produce high-quality results. Louann and Dave observed that research is not just about “finding the right answer” or “being correct” but also about digging into the various angles of an issue. This is another form of “openness” that thrives off of--and depends on--what Addisa Rigaud later referred to as our “relationship-centered writing process.”

At the end of the day, there's no substitute for the perspective of the student-writers themselves. So here they are below, anonymous and lightly edited, excerpts from the last writing assignment: "Reflections on the Writing Journey." They offer a tiny glimpse of the vast field of emotions and insights that are part of our very complex situation.

This was a hard year in terms of academics. Sometimes I dreaded writing, only wanting to cook and watch movies with my pod to get me through to the next day. Other times I surprised myself with my endurance and inspired myself by what I already had in me.

I don't feel like I am finished, I think because the work I have been producing during COVID never feels to the same standard as the work I have done before. I think I wrote to the best of my ability at this time, but this paper still feels lacking in something - I can't quite put my finger on it. Perhaps it is because of the bigness of the word Capstone - the cumulative paper of my time here, the thing that has been hanging over my head for four years. I feel like it should be the best thing I've ever written, eighty pages long, with a thousand footnotes. And frankly, none of that feels remotely possible.

I have struggled with prioritizing my productivity over my mental health to

the point where emotions such as stress were dismissed with the thought "I don't have time for this right now." Especially given the circumstances of racialized police violence, elections and a global pandemic ... emotions and their communicative tendencies [play] a central role in regulating mental health in such a fast paced society. Unlearning the notion that sadness and anger are considered "bad emotions" or "emotions not socially acceptable" has been a relieving process. People are allowed to feel these emotions as they are not only valid but communicate one's needs and behaviors.

In this writing process I felt extremely supported by the peer review process... It was clear that everything we were writing about was coming from a place of curiosity and passion. That made it automatically much more engaging to read. Hearing everyone's thoughtful responses made me feel excited to share my writing with the group... It made me feel supported and able to continue working, knowing that my classmates were interested and supportive of my writing.

It was a good paper to end my Macalester experience on because it's about the questions I have right now and the barriers I'm facing. It helped me reflect on my priorities and my goals for the future. I'm at a time of my life where I don't have many answers, or maybe I'm

at a time of my life when I'm realizing there aren't many answers and I need to act anyway.

At the end of the day, it got done. I'm not really sure how. It felt long and grudging and at times joyful and at times exhausting. I don't know if it is good or bad or just okay, I don't know how I managed to finish it, to write this reflection, to make it through this year. But if you are reading this then that means that the AMST Class of 2021 managed to put something on paper: in a pandemic in the cold on their computers under capitalism on Zoom in the second wave in isolation.

Yes, my dears, it got done. Let the entire *Tapestries 2021* volume stand as a tribute to the sheer gumption of these students, a memory posted to the distant future. May this work, nurtured under the most difficult of circumstances, bring great illumination to the next generation of scholars and teachers, not only in American Studies but wherever you, *The Reader*, may be found.

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