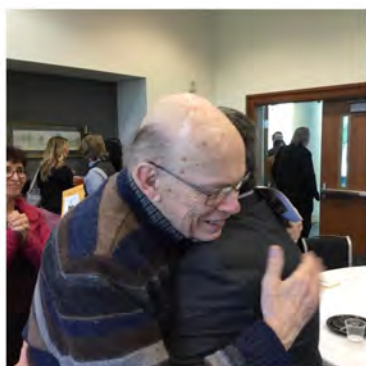


# History Happenings

*A newsletter published by the Department of History at the University of Memphis*

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## Dan Unowsky: History is Happening

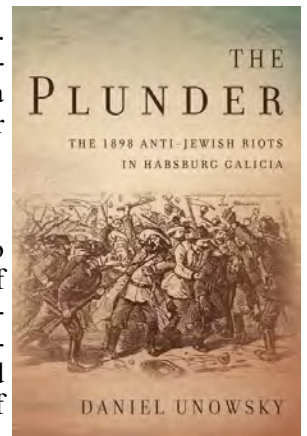
We are currently facing several overlapping crises. COVID-19 knows no borders. Here at home, the pandemic has laid bare existing inequalities. The struggle for racial justice has inspired millions of people in ways evoking the marches of the 1960s. Political polarization has become more and more extreme. American citizens define each other as enemies instead of neighbors with whom we disagree.

What insights can the past offer us about our present reality? Films, books, podcasts have popularized various versions of this aphorism: “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” Historians, however, know that there are seldom clear lessons derived from other times and places that we can apply easily to our current circumstances. Social and cultural dynamics shift. Scientific and technological innovation is transforming lives faster now than perhaps any other time in the past.

But then where does that leave all of us who find relevance in exploring human experience in the past? History does not offer simple solutions to current problems; however, the study of the choices and actions taken by individuals and societies in past crises helps us all to think in new ways about our moment.

The Department of History is very pleased to present this special edition of *History Happenings*. Our editors asked faculty members to submit brief notes “about one thing that has been intellectually occupying you during this quarantined era. It can be a book or article that you read, a movie that inspired you, an idea that you’ve been pursuing, a cause that you have espoused, or anything else along these broad lines.”

For myself, I have become more and more engaged with the question of popular resistance to evidence-based arguments, the kind of arguments made by scholars in all fields including, of course, history. My most recent book was a study of anti-Jewish violence in the Habsburg province of Galicia (today divided between Poland and Ukraine) around 1900. Many of the participants in the riots claimed that government officials, the Pope, the emperor, or some deceased public figure had given specific permission to attack Jews and destroy property. The arrest of thousands and the killing of nearly 20 by the police and the military did not end the rumors. These government actions to quell the violence only inspired a shift: for true believers, such arrests and killings only seemed to confirm that secret Jewish power was real and was undermining the true will of the emperor/pope/etc.



It took a series of public trials and the sentencing of thousands to prison to weaken this conviction. Educated urbanites in central Europe interpreted the rumors and conspiracist thinking as evidence of the backward nature of the region and the peasants involved. Like the philosophes of the French Enlightenment, many were sure such ignorance would fade away with education and progress.

Yet, as we know, fantastic claims would surge again with the publication of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion in the early twentieth century in the Russian Empire, its subsequent translation into English, German, and other languages, and the promotion of antisemitic conspiracies by Henry Ford and many others. Today, conspiracies as factually lacking and convoluted as those widespread in Europe in the 1890s live on in the virtual universe. Like the antisemitic conspiracy theories of the past—from which today’s conspiracists draw—they rise from the dead again and again, morphing and incorporating new information, and employed for political and other purposes.

What can historians do? We must endeavor to counter conspiracy thinking by teaching the value of evidence-based understandings of the world. This is what our courses are all about. We welcome you to join us! We want you to know that in the midst of what often feels like chaos, our department and the university remain committed to providing our students with the education they deserve. We wish you and your families well in these difficult times, and we hope that these professors’ reflections are entertaining and illuminating.



## Michele Coffey: Mask Me Anything

The most challenging thing about the pandemic for me has been the feeling that I could not control much of anything—and worse, that I could not make things better for the people around me. As I struggled with that feeling of helplessness in early March, I started to research the masks that it seemed would soon be necessary for us all. I spent hours reading about the best filter materials and fabrics to use and quickly discovered that many of those materials were in short supply even that early in the pandemic.



It took me a bit, but I eventually found an effective pattern, an assortment of cotton fabrics, hair ties for ear-loops, and filters cut from the linings of particular vacuum cleaner bags. I then turned our dining room into an assembly line and started sewing first for essential workers in my husband’s plant. Then I started to distribute masks to those who delivered packages to us and those who came into our neighborhood to do service work. I sewed masks for all of our families, friends all over the country, and former students. At one point, I even had strangers picking up the masks off of my front porch. As of today, I have sewn and distributed just over 300 masks.



## Brad Dixon: Smallpox, Big Deal

The role of disease in history understandably has taken on a new importance in my thinking lately. Students in my course on Chucalissa are delving into the long history of that town and the region surrounding it, a history that epidemics scarred. During the colonial era in America, disease helped to shatter Native American societies, hastening the collapse of Mississippian chiefdoms, and led to the formation of new nations from the fragments.

But disease never worked alone. Colonialism enabled and catalyzed its advance. As Europeans established outposts on the Atlantic coast, Natives as far away as modern-day Memphis joined the emerging global economy. The colonial trade in deerskins, guns, and Native slaves revolutionized the Southeast and, as students have learned in class, helped to establish the conditions that made the spread of deadly diseases easier. Most Natives now found themselves living in a new world of unprecedented interconnections and violence, huddled together in nucleated towns behind palisades for defense that actually made them more vulnerable to an invisible enemy: foreign microbes.

The result of the slave trade’s transformation of the region was what Paul Kelton calls the “Great Southeastern Smallpox Epidemic,” four years of rolling devastation from 1696-1700. In short, social and environmental factors served to promote the spread of the worst diseases Europeans brought across the Atlantic. This concept, “disease ecology,” proved easy to grasp for students in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic. Covid-19 doesn’t strike evenly throughout the population, nor did other diseases in our past.



History offers other lessons, too. The key to survival for Native peoples was resilience—an ability to adapt constructively and creatively in the midst of crisis.

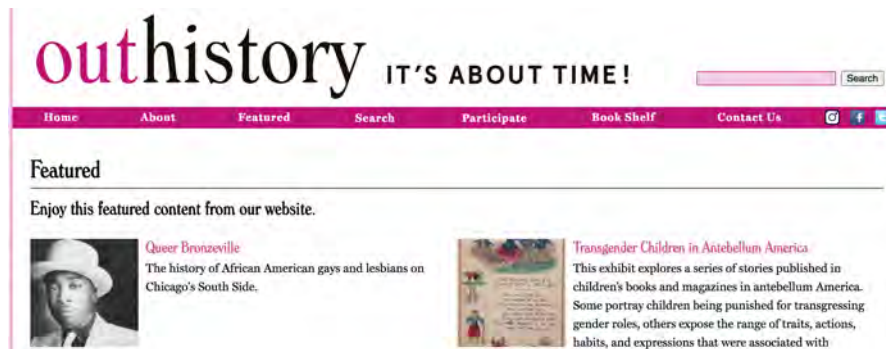
## Cookie Woolner: Get Out!

In difficult times, learning about how people in the past also dealt with hardships can be reassuring and inspiring. My area of specialty, LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer) history, offers myriad examples of individuals encountering legal discrimination, violence, and health crises. Yet at the same time, stories of activism, agency, community building and pride are also central to queer history.



These are all reasons I'm honored to have been recently asked to be a co-director for OutHistory.org, an important free repository for LGBTQ history created in 2008 by the pathbreaking gay historian Jonathan Ned Katz. I was particularly excited because Katz compiled and edited the first book of primary sources on U.S. histories of same-sex desire and gender transgression in the 1970s, which inspired my own research as a grad student and my decision to focus on this rich subfield.

I'm looking forward to adding more content to this huge online archive – especially related to the queer South – and helping professors, teachers, and students use and add to the site in their classes. For anyone interested in learning more about LGBTQ life, OutHistory.org will introduce you to a multitude of people, events, topics, and timelines to enrich your knowledge and remind you of how people in the past surmounted difficult times and even thrived.



## Amanda Lee Savage: Fight for your RITES!

Last year Zyanya Cruz and I joined together to form a grassroots political and educational organization called Native RITES (Reclaiming our Indigenous Truths, Education, and Sovereignty.) Zyanya and I met almost a decade ago, when I guest-lectured in her Native American history course, taught that year by Dr. Joe Hawes. Zyanya graduated with a BA in History. Though we trace our Native origins to different places — she to this continent, and my family to the Pacific — Zyanya and I delighted in meeting one another and forming that connection in the department.

After years of keeping in touch through talks, events, and organizing, we decided to formalize our community work, and Native RITES is the result. While the pandemic makes it difficult for us to work with our communities directly, we've used this time to support other nations across the continent, most recently raising funds for personal protective equipment for the Navajo Nation. We've worked to amplify indigenous voices and perspectives in events with Facing History and Ourselves, the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, the Church Health Center, and Rhodes College. Our organization co-authored the City of Memphis Land Acknowledgement with the Chickasaw Nation.

If interested, you can catch us in November speaking (virtually) with the Tennessee State Museum as part of their 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment centennial programming. And while I am excited and energized by our work, my story here is really about a decade-old professional courtesy that resulted in a non-profit organization. Our department is full of potential, and now more than ever we need to be intentional about creating opportunities for one another, and for our students. But that means taking chances on one another, too.



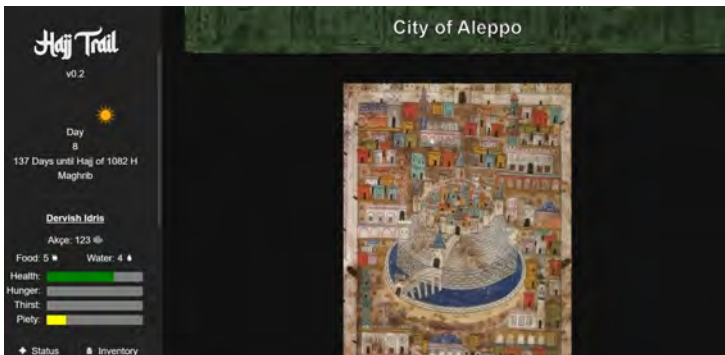
## Tyler Kynn: Ohhhh, It's Kind of a *Hajj*-podge

During this period of quarantine, with a friend from my old PhD cohort, I started to code a Muslim pilgrimage version of the historical Oregon Trail game I found so interesting when I was a kid. Over these months, my quarantine side project has been to build this game based off manuscripts and other material I collected in my research about pilgrimage to Mecca in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.



The game takes the student along the pilgrimage road from Istanbul to Mecca with many stops and diversions in between during the late seventeenth century. Each stop includes markets, watering holes, stables, shrines, and historical quotes about each stop which students can interact with as they try to recreate the five-month journey from Istanbul to Mecca.

Along the way, students will encounter bandits, corrupt officials, merchants, myths from the time, and all sorts of characters and dangers which defined the experience of travel during this time. While the game looks more 1999 than 2020, each stop has historical paintings, local folk music, and other features to give students a sense of the times and a different perspective of the Islamic World than what they would get from a primary source reading or some lecture slides.



This passion project is both fun for me and is driven by my desire to craft digital tools for teaching world history that we as global historians do not yet have on hand, to have the form of teaching fit the new digital medium. The game itself is in Alpha testing now ([www.hajjtrail.com](http://www.hajjtrail.com)), and some of my students will get a chance to play it at the end of the semester in our world history class, with hope that it will be fully released and also as a free app sometime next spring.

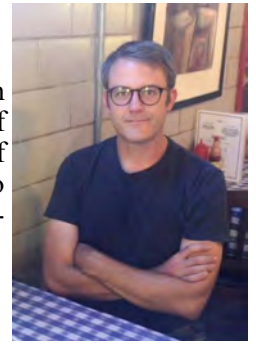
## Peter Brand: Let My Scholarship Go!

*What the pandemic taketh away, the pandemic giveth.* During my enforced seclusion at home beginning in March, I had no shortage of things to occupy my mind, including following news developments much too closely. This abated during the summer doldrums, and then the fall election came upon us. I was lucky to have applied for a fall sabbatical to conduct research and for travel to Europe and Egypt. With a ban on both domestic and international travel, I have not strayed beyond the confines of the greater Memphis area, much less to Prague in the Czech Republic, Leuven in Belgium, and Luxor in Egypt. I made the best of my “staycation” by compiling illustrations and footnotes for my upcoming biography of the Pharaoh Ramesses II. The book was original slated to appear in Spring 2021, but it has been pushed back to next Fall due to COVID. The book, *Ramesses II: Egypt's Ultimate Pharaoh*, will be published by Lockwood Press.



## Ben Graham: The Horror! The Horror!

One of the most interesting things I've stumbled upon in the last few months is the new television series from Jordan Peele and Misha Green, *Lovecraft Country*. *LC* works mostly within the genre of horror, setting its black protagonists in 1950s Jim Crow America—racism evokes a constant sense of terror for an extended family, both at home (in Chicago) and driving across the country, trying to understand their past. *LC*'s themes are exhilarating for a horror fan like myself, as it provides a perfect lens onto the present, just as (good) horror has always done.



Classic horror films of the late 1970s and early 1980s, like *Halloween* (1978), *Poltergeist* (1982), and *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) used the illusory safety of white suburbs as the backdrop to their terror—the whole enterprise was meant to interrogate the dubious motivations of white flight, which was supported through federal laws that prohibited racial integration of the new neighborhoods in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s (see Richard Rothstein's fantastic book, *The Color of Law*). Such films were some of the first popular media to question and subvert the naïve and soulless optimism of “morning in America.”



Like its horror predecessors, *Lovecraft Country* uses fear as a mechanism for exploring important social themes, with powerful resonance to the present reckoning on race in America. By adopting the perspective of a black family navigating Jim Crow, *LC* brilliantly parallels conventional figures of the horror genre, like Lovecraftian monsters (Cthulhu), ghosts, and reanimated corpses with racist sheriffs in a sun-down town and violent opposition of a black family by white neighbors in a red-lined neighborhood of Chicago. The effect is not just to realize the horrors of racism—that would be too simplistic for *LC*—but to interrogate the sundry structures of the American past shaped by racism. It's really good, smart televi-

## Beverly Tsacoyianis: One Flu Over the Historian's Test

How do you teach world history during a pandemic? I screen the 1998 episode of *American Experience* about the 1918 influenza pandemic. I assign excerpts of *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* by Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway. I think about the intersections of science, politics, and memory, and about what's at stake when leaders manipulate through fear.



My own book, *Disturbing Spirits: Mental Illness, Trauma, and Treatment in Modern Syria and Lebanon* is forthcoming in June 2021 with the University of Notre Dame Press. It's painful to think about celebrating the book's release when so many in Syria and Lebanon can't celebrate with me.

I think about the role governments play in identifying threats to public safety (whether disease vectors or scapegoats), and in preventing or hastening the spread of discontent (whether repressing political opposition or infectious disease). Woodrow Wilson sent US troops to Europe in 1918 even though he knew they brought a *profoundly* virulent strain of influenza with them. Terms like “Spanish flu” obscure the fact that Spain's king, unlike leaders of Allied and Central Powers countries, allowed the press to report on the tragedy.



Health and politics are deeply intertwined. In 1918, physicians knew quarantine could help, but they didn't know flu comes from a virus, not a bacterium, and they didn't know the respiratory droplets would spread if the right masks weren't used. They did not know yet how to produce effective vaccines. The US also did not yet have racial integration or women's suffrage. Over a hundred years later, we know better, so I hope we'll do better. Take care, and remember healing comes in many forms.



## Caroline Peyton: Don't Just Stand There, Buster Move

In our current moment, products marketed as solutions to the problems of distance and convenience, such as Zoom, have now become a necessity. And yet, these tools are neither labor-saving, nor a genuine replacement for human interaction. One hundred years ago, Americans buying the latest domestic technologies similarly confronted this paradox. Lately, I've come to appreciate the profound, and often hilarious, insights embedded within silent films; they are rich, and surprisingly relevant, primary source texts. One of the great comics of the silent movie era, Buster Keaton, understood the paradoxes of modernity. Battles with the mechanized world frequently appear in his movies. One of those films, Keaton's *The Electric House* (1922), captures the absurdity of so-called modern conveniences.

Keaton plays a freshly minted PhD in botany, but during the graduation ceremony, diplomas are mixed up, and our plucky, if entirely ill-qualified protagonist, now with an electrical engineering degree in hand, agrees to wire a wealthy man's house, in the hopes of impressing a young woman. What he lacks in professional expertise, the protagonist makes up for in enthusiasm, electrifying the staircase, bookshelves, kitchen, bedroom, bathroom, and even the swimming pool, thereby mechanizing tasks easily done with manual labor, or best left without an electrical current. While the newly wired house impresses everyone momentarily, Keaton extracts plenty of gags from the many electrified features going haywire, and from his showdown with the real electrical engineer. In the end, both Keaton and the engineer, through the pool contraption, are flushed down into the city's sewage system. To the sewage they return!

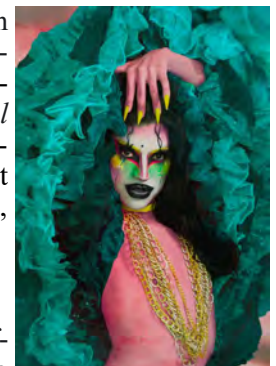


## Isabel Machado: Can't Drag Me Down



I'm not a COVID optimist. I see no silver lining on this nightmarish historical moment we are experiencing. I often wonder what's the point in trying to be "productive" in the middle of this crisis. Sometimes it is hard to find a sense of purpose in research and teaching after my morning doomscrolling. So, when I was asked to write about what had been intellectually occupying me lately, I decided to write instead about something that has emotionally occupied me (in a positive way).

I am finishing my first book (on Alabama's Mardi Gras) while working on a new oral history project (with Mexican gender-nonconforming performers). A few months ago, I asked the incredibly talented artist Alfredo Bisset to create an image for the cover of a special issue that I am guest editing for the *Journal of Festive Studies*. Bisset recreates classic works of Mexican art through their drag character Rebel Mork. They also speak very openly about their battles with anxiety and depression and use art and performance to deal with their own struggles, to spread awareness of mental health issues, and to express their support for and solidarity with those who are also experiencing it.



They sent me this image on a day that I was particularly feeling like that meme-dog drinking coffee in a burning room. It is their interpretation/embodyment of US Carnival and represents the



convergence of my projects. While, in the grand scheme of things, this does not remediate the horrors I read about daily, it gave me a sense of hope and purpose when I needed the most. Alfredo/Rebel taught me that it is ok to admit when we are not ok and showed me the importance of using our skills and talents to provide little moments of joy to those around us.

Gracias, *mije!*



## Christine Eisel: A Dash of Time

I have been thinking about time lately, perhaps because the way I spend my own time has changed over the last few months. I think a lot about time and chronology, though. In my courses, I often ask students about periodization.

Recently, I have worked with the other early Americanists (Brad Dixon and Amanda Lee Savage) on re-envisioning how we teach the early American course rotation. Why do courses end or begin with the American Revolution? Who decided that this should be

the case? Much of the newer scholarship places the war for independence into a broader context, considering it as part of a longer process rather than the beginning or end of some idea or way of life or political game or way to mark time.



So, the concept of time has been an undercurrent in how I think about teaching and in my own scholarship, although in fairly expected ways. A recent Twitter post, though, has renewed my interest in time as a concept with a wide-ranging history of its own. Two Twitterstorians pointed to how historians might consider time “as a concept beyond calendar and chronology” and what would happen if historians thought more about “time as experienced.” The threads were full of suggested readings. So, as I think and read more about who decides how we not just mark time, but experience time, I’m considering, too, what might the implications be for those decisions and how might they reveal power dynamics.



## Dennis Laumann: Doctor, Doctor, Give Me the News

The inevitability of the global pandemic struck me on a lovely evening during Spring Break in Havana, where I was conducting research for my next book, a history of Cuba and Africa. When I had left Memphis the previous week, there were only a few clusters of COVID-19 cases in the United States and absolutely none in Cuba.

That evening, I was enjoying coffee with a retired pediatrician, Dr. Dévorah Sevilla Martínez, in her living room. Suddenly, her husband, Dr. Fermín Jorge Robaina Aguirre (pictured with me to the left) entered the house. A gynecologist, he explained that he had just attended an emergency meeting about the pandemic. Earlier that day, the government announced the first cases in Cuba—four Italian tourists—and preparations were quickly underway to confront the situation. By the time I left Cuba, two days later, facemasks were a common sight and soap dispensers were filled with a diluted bleach solution. The pan-

demetic had finally reached Cuba but, by then, it was already raging in the U.S. I returned to 14 days of self-quarantine in Memphis, remotely teaching from my bedroom.

I visited Dr. Sevilla and Dr. Robaina (pictured on the right, in Libya in 1979) to interview them about their experiences as black Cubans on medical missions to several African countries since the 1970s. While the relationship between Cuba and Africa begins with the horrors of the Atlantic Slave Trade, since the Cuban Revolution it has been characterized by what scholars term “South-South Cooperation” and “Black Internationalism.” Dr. Sevilla and Dr. Robaina are protagonists in that history, as they spent extended periods of their marriage far from home, providing health care to underserved communities in nations like Libya and South Africa, while reconnecting with the continent of their ancestors.

Back at home, as I transcribed that interview during the lockdown, the media reported on Cuba’s response to the pandemic. To date, Cuba has sent medical missions to about 40 countries on five continents, from the small West African nation of Togo to Italy, one of the European countries most drastically affected by COVID-19.







## Catherine Phipps: Kawata Story!

I have spent a lot of time this semester thinking about a fascinating Japanese adventurer, Kawata Masazō, who traveled the world nearly 150 years ago, writing a series called “Gun Smoke and Flashing Swords.” By the time Kawata was coming of age after the 1868 Meiji Restoration, it was possible for him to travel the Pacific world—from the Ogasawara Islands to the Arctic and the Americas, and from Japan to Korea and China—with ease, finding employment as needed, interacting with both ordinary and famous individuals, befriendng the Korean revolutionary Kim Ok-gyun, whaling and digging for gold, and reporting on the 1891 Chilean Revolution.

The travel experiences and travel-based reporting of this unusually adventurous and seemingly fearless individual richly demonstrate that his opportunities were forged in an age of revolution and imperialism. Examining Kawata’s life and writings also reveal how global travel, foreign encounter, and intellectual exchange intersected with East Asian geopolitics just prior to the outbreak of the First Sino-Japanese War in the summer of 1894.



Aside from being a great escape from the problems of today’s world, writing about Kawata has also given me the chance to think about some of the places I’ve traveled to in the last few years. I had the opportunity to give talks about my research on Kawata at the EHESS in Paris, the SOAS in London, and at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. So as I’ve been writing about Kawata, I’ve had the chance to revisit those experiences, remembering the sights and sounds as well as the scholars I had the opportunity to interact with and the useful feedback I received. I have now submitted my research as a journal article for review and ultimately plan to turn this work into a book.

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## Aram Goudsouzian: Courting Change

The stars of the NBA soar through the air with power and grace. They swish jumpers from incredible distances. They glide down the court in long strides. Their size, speed and skill compel your attention. They swallow up the space around them. They have presence.



It is remarkable, then, that the most resonant image from this basketball season is one of an empty court. The players are nowhere in sight. There is only the NBA logo at center court and, along one sideline, the words “Black Lives Matter.”

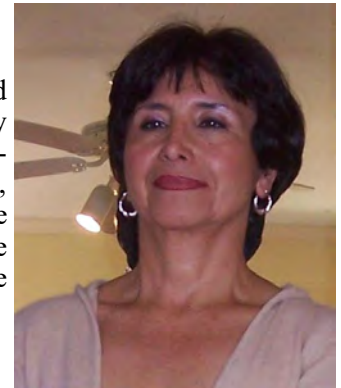
Later in life, when I reflect upon the summer of 2020, I will remember this image from the NBA’s COVID-free “bubble” in Florida. The court was empty because on August 26, the Milwaukee Bucks had refused to participate in a playoff game against the Orlando Magic. They were protesting the police shooting of a Black man, Jacob Blake, in Kenosha, Wisconsin. It had been a summer of high-profile political action by athletes following the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, and Breonna Taylor. The Bucks’ protest inspired more cancellations in professional basketball, baseball, tennis, and soccer.



This same summer, I was co-writing a book chapter with the Arizona State sociologist Scott Brooks, and this dramatic moment was changing our ending. We sought to explain the current moment in sports activism by first considering the “Revolt of the Black Athlete” in the late 1960s. We tried to illustrate that today’s athletes, like their 1960s counterparts, have undergone a process of political hopes and persistent frustrations. In the tumultuous moment—as activists again took to the streets, Black voices compelled confrontations with systemic racism, and the President of the United States stoked a reactionary backlash—Black athletes were once again in revolt.

## Guiomar Duenas-Vargas: Class is in Session

In a “Fresh Air” episode in May, Terry Gross interviewed the journalist and writer Brigid Schulte about the disruptive effects of the pandemic in the home. Schulte has written widely about the traditional unequal sexual division of work, as most women have paying jobs outside the house, and still bear the brunt of household chores and childcare. The pandemic, according to Schulte, has shown a “grotesque gender inequality in household work.” We, she says, have internalized a distorted view of what a family should be. “We still think that one person should go out to work and be responsible for...supporting the family, and there should be somebody always available at home to do the care and care work.”



Schulte’s analysis relates to middle and upper middle class homes. For working class families, the consequences of the pandemic extended beyond the household. Fighting COVID-19 has been a matter of survival. The pandemic has highlighted the extreme vulnerability of women of color, who suffer the combine effects of racial, gender, ethnic, and social bias, in the work place and in society in general.

Data consistently show that, across all family structures, women of color play a vital role in providing economic support, which the families rely upon to make ends meet. A “Center for the American Progress” analysis of 2018 data from the Current Population Survey found that 67.5% of black mothers and 41.4% of Latina mothers were the primary or sole breadwinners for their families, compared with 37% of white mothers.

COVID-19 has affected the type of work low paid women do. Women of color disproportionally comprise workers in jobs such as maids and house-keeping cleaners, nursing assistants, personal care aides, and home health aides. The pandemic has allowed us to see the many dimensions of gender and racial inequalities.



## Suzanne Onstine: A Zoom of One’s Own

When I was in high school I took an English class devoted to science fiction. The teacher assigned us the short story “The Machine Stops” written in 1909 by E.M Forster. Its a story that seems weirdly prescient in these times; it is set in a future where individuals are living underground, isolated from each other but linked via a machine that provides for all physical needs, including a medium for communicating with others using audio-visual technology, remarkably like Zoom or Skype.

A young me could not imagine that kind of future outside of a science fiction setting. And certainly the author’s intent was to portray this in a negative way. I have a fair bit of ambivalence about technology and its pervasiveness in our lives. But In these pandemic circumstances, however, I have spent a lot of time thinking about how technology shapes interactions; how it limits or expands an audience. I have attended numerous Zoom conferences and lectures in my field of Egyptology that geography and money would have prevented me from attending in any other time. The opportunity to spend some time learning from my colleagues all over the world reminds me of everything I loved about grad school in Toronto without the pressure of writing papers.

Mastering this method of delivery will be an important step forward in creating more equity in disseminating ideas and reduces the carbon footprint of academia. We may not love a full schedule of Zoom meetings with people in our own town, but a future where more people can participate in academic dialogues without the limitations that geography and money bring, is a better one. Just don’t forget to take a walk once in a while.

