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Susan Naomi Bernstein

Reflection

My partner and I moved back to Queens, New York, from Arizona in 2018, and we were pleased to discover our neighborhood Center for Older Adults. Our small workshop group of older adults, which NYC defines as anyone over 60, met in a small room in the basement of the Center and shared poems of poets we admired (Audre Lorde; Joy Harjo; Pablo Neruda; [links via URL below](#)) and then wrote poems together.

The next year brought the catastrophe of the Coronavirus pandemic. Our city suffered disasters, emergencies, and lockdowns, and our local community suffered loss upon loss. We were reminded that, as older adults, we were among the populations most vulnerable to dying from the coronavirus. The Center closed for in-person congregate activities and shifted to survival mode focusing on food distribution for those of us who were home-bound for the foreseeable future.

By late Spring of 2020, the Center was able to set up Zoom activities for our community, including the poetry workshop with my partner and me facilitating. Around this time George Floyd ([link via URL below](#)) was murdered by the police in Minneapolis. The workshop was much smaller and all of us were white, so my partner and I decided to focus on the work of Black writers, especially James Baldwin ([link via URL below](#)).

Quilting—and the plan for a coronavirus quilting project—came much later. After lockdown, my long-diagnosed generalized anxiety grew much worse. Making art offered a means of articulating swirling emotions that seemed to elude written language. Quilting became a way of free writing without words, an attempt to bring together disparate pieces of what the pandemic had ripped apart.

I had come to quilting several years before in Arizona. Stuck inside for months in relentless heat, I quilted to give a neurodivergent visual and kinesthetic form to my academic work. I had a sewing room and a collection of fabric screen prints from the Occupy Wall Street Screen CoopPrinters ([link via URL below](#)). One of the artists suggested I make a quilt with the prints, and became a means against forgetting Occupy Wall Street and those brief extraordinary moments in Zuccotti Park.

But when I moved back to an extremely small living space in NYC I gave up quilting because I didn't seem to have either the room or the long hot summers to do this work. The pandemic changed this.

The coronavirus quilt evolved from mourning my father's death from the coronavirus before vaccines were available, which I write about in the essay "The Body Cannot Sustain an Insurrection" ([link via the QR code below](#)), but it had gestated for nearly two years, until my partner and I caught the virus in December 2022.

We were fully vaccinated, and our cases were mild. During quarantine, I embroidered a bird from a cross stitch birthday gift. I spent quarantine embroidering the bird, and wondering how I could make an embroidered coronavirus, a monstrous virus, a virus of many colors with angry mRNA eyes, noses, and mouths. Using a diagram I found on the internet, I made a paper pattern, then traced the pattern on a reusable grocery bag. The corona virus quilt was born.

Even as the national emergency was ending, the pandemic did not. 1.13 + million people were still dead, my father among them. Like Occupy, I did not want the lessons from this time to be forgotten, so I wrote *Against Forgetting* on the back of an old canvas patch, words I remembered from the poet Carolyn Forché (link via URL below) and embroidered over the letters.

My partner took the poetry workshop from Zoom to an email list that now includes Center staff as well as older adult members. I still write with the group from time to time, half-finished poems lie like fabric swatches meant to try to describe the indescribable pandemic:

Should I offer words to ease the stress?
As the flood gathers and the waters press

I cannot think how to connect the words to anything else. Instead, I return to my coronavirus quilt, working toward completion, stitch by neverending stitch.

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Please scan the QR code for access to the material linked above.



Author Bio

Susan Naomi Bernstein (she/they) quilts, writes, and teaches in Queens, NY. She blogs for Bedford Bits, and her recent publications include “The Body Cannot Sustain an Insurrection” in the *Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics* and “After Basic Writing” in *TETYC*. Susan has exhibited her quilts in Phoenix, Arizona and Brooklyn, NY. She thanks S. Cormany and I. James for their peer review insights and support.