

Between Two Cities

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21985/n2-kh3w-d783>

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The memory is still vivid: I was slumped into a comfortable chair in the small café in the second floor of the MOMA, sipping a too-bitter Americano, scanning the news-feed of my telephone. “Kobe Bryant is dead,” I spoke aloud though to no one in particular, surprising myself with my momentary shock. The young man sitting next to me, also absorbed in his phone, looked up and nodded vaguely. Kobe, I could tell, meant more to him than to me.

This was on January 26th. Other, less eventful news was also in the air. A novel coronavirus, a tangle of RNA wrapped in an icosahedral protein shell, was spreading rapidly through the Chinese city of Wuhan, and had also made its way to Thailand, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Vietnam, South Korea. Cases were also confirmed France, Australia, Canada, and the United States, yet it remained, in the popular imagination -- in my imagination, even -- a distant, and Asian thing. If I felt a certain degree of dread, it was because, at the end of the month, my wife and I would be flying back to Korea, where I had been teaching for the last 14 years. It was as if the geographic distinction between “Asia” and the “West,” this cultural construct whose already rather dubious substance had been eviscerated by globalization, still offered, even to me --who had every reason to know better --an illusion of protection; as if the globe was still somehow cleaved in two.

And so it seemed, at the time, as if I was heading into a place of danger, of exposure. Five days later we were on a Korean Air flight, the cabin crew masked and gloved. Arriving in Korea was like stepping into the plague. The faces of strangers disappeared more and more behind white masks. Cautionary posters were everywhere. Cafes and restaurants had thinned out a bit. The fear in the street was palpable, and, without any great fanfare, news habits had taken hold. In contrast, the places I'd visited during my time in the states, including my sister's neighborhood in Queens, still seemed unaffected by the invisible threat. No one wore a mask. The cafes and streets were as packed as before. This insouciance was contagious: the almost universal lack of concern itself seemed like a magical amulet warding off the danger. When the breakout in Daegu happened toward the end of February, South Korea briefly became the epicenter, and the government response was quick. Schools and universities went online. Work meetings and social engagements were cancelled. Restrictions were placed on public gatherings. The United States still seemed to have been spared; at the end of February, there had only been one death reported and barely more than a handful of cases.

As I returned to Seoul at the end of January, CNN was still mourning Kobe's death. The novel coronavirus was a growing, but still subdued, presence in the international media. By the middle of March, however, Italy, Spain, France, Germany, and the UK had all seen dramatic surges in the cases, and in the United States a state of national emergency had been declared. Soon there were refrigerated trucks waiting in the parking lot of Elmhurst Hospital in Queens, a short walk from my sister's apartment, to hold the corpses overflowing the morgue. Field hospitals were being built in central park.

Kobe Bryant fell from the sky into a world where things seemed like they would go more or less as they always did. Now, however, the MOMA and its art is shuttered, the streets and sidewalks of Manhattan are empty. What once seemed like the simplest thing in the world, sitting next to an unmasked stranger in a café, has become, in many parts of the earth, an impossibility. When strangers do still meet,

death is there between them; it no longer needs celebrity to bring it into the open. And indeed, the kind of death that Kobe died, mourned in the media for days on end, has become a thing of the past. Death in the news is only a statistic; a number accumulating by the day and the hour. Even if we all know in the end that in the end we will die of something, there was a consolation in thinking that this death would be an event, privately meaningful, even if undramatic and uncelebrated. This consolation has, if only temporarily, withdrawn from the world.

Flying back to Korea, it seemed I was flying into disaster. But this isn't how it turned out. South Korea, with aggressive testing and tracing, kept things under control without ever "locking down." As of today, May 23rd, there 11,165 cases, and 266 deaths. Still, nearly everyone still wears masks, carefully rationed out by the government.

There is a tendency, not only in the West, to depict the success of East Asian countries in fighting COVID-19 as the result of some vague "authoritarianism" or "neo-Confucian" conformity. Nevertheless, there are differences, I think, which cannot be reduced just to concrete policy. These differences perhaps come down to the very different ways in which different body politics replicate the possible immune responses of an individual body. By nearly all accounts, South Korea responded in a way that mirrored a body successfully warding off a disease; with measures that were always measured to the situation. The response in the United States, haphazardly orchestrated at the federal level, is characterized by a lack of measure, strategic coordination, and follow-through; the political equivalent of a cytokine storm.

If I were to dare draw something like a conclusion from my experiences, – but it's still too soon for this –, it would be that what is needed is a "constructive" rather than purely "critical" biopolitics. If the epidemic exigencies of the present and future are not to lead to the worst outcome – mass casualties, economic despair, and also

the loss of freedom – then the vulnerability of our ordinary social body must be publicly acknowledged.