

# Writing Ourselves Out

## Collaborative Autoethnography from the Epicenter of a Pandemic

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**Abstract** The following text is the product of a collaborative writing group, who took up Curare's call for coronavirus diaries in the Malinowskian style. As the United States became the epicenter of COVID-19 in March 2020, nine academics (graduate students and a professor from The New School for Social Research) trained their observation skills and recorded their introspections about their experiences from within. Though various social distancing measures stymied their previously mobile lifestyles, writing and meeting digitally took on cathartic resonance and provided a means for connection. In this text, a subset of four diarists present a few salient aspects of life during the pandemic, as the recursivity of writing and reading together not only pushed us beyond our interior spaces but also diffused our singular perspectives into a layered text that interrogates boundary formation, maintenance, and negotiation. Each section has a different author but includes ethnographic "data" from other diarists. The first piece is a metacognitive reflection on the methodology of diary writing and anthropologists navigating their positions as remote observers. The following sections localize globally pertinent topics on the meanings and materialities of mask-wearing; the challenges and dilemmas that emerged from a tepid social distancing policy; and the imaginaries of multispecies interactions opened up by hygiene/cleaning practices around COVID-19. This text represents reflexive and collaborative work. The ethnographers themselves move between subject/object positions. Scope, scale, and temporality are unfixed, lending a sense of dynamic collectivities and new possibilities that are evident in content and method.

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### Introduction

Ethnographic work typically centers around an "experience-near" perspective, one in which an anthropologist attains entry into some kind of community. But the physical closeness and mobility often required for that work became restricted as the spread of SARS-CoV-2 accelerated in New York in mid-March of 2020. "Stay-at-home" orders were issued, universities shuttered, and the usual din turned to deafening quiet save for an eerie uptick in the frequency of ambulance sirens. Public health measures required avoiding gatherings with individuals from outside one's household and keeping two meters' distance from one another in public places. As we saw our lives closing in, eight graduate students and a professor from The New School for Social Research took up Curare's invitation to keep Malinowskian-esque diaries. We also saw the ethnographic potential of

engagement in a unique type of participant observation that allows for close social and intellectual proximity while being physically distanced.

From natural sciences to philosophy, scholarly pursuits share a long history of celebrating solitude to acquire genuine knowledge (SHAPLIN 1991). However, the trope of the "lone anthropologist" became not only inaccessible as social distancing policies limited our range to our own homes but also disingenuous as our physical and intellectual spaces co-mingled.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, we remained forced to immerse ourselves in solitary spaces, avoiding physical interactions with others; on the other hand, digital data and online conversations proliferated and generated ethnographic materials that are intrinsically collective and shared. The collaborative writing of diaries became a confrontation and an opening. By ex-

posing our interiorities in ways that are impermissible in conventional social settings and academic exchange, we were able to observe and analyze the pandemic beyond our personal lives and living spaces.

Writing together while apart thus became an opportunity to compensate for our limited physical movement: a roving eye/I that sought catharsis through regular writing, sympathy through reading each other's diaries alongside the broader news, and security through reconciling renderings of self and other. Four of us ethnographers/diarists then embarked on a multi-perspectival analysis of our partially imbricated experiences, assembling a window from individual "panes," facing inward and outward. We used all nine diaries as ethnographic materials, with sensitivity to the vulnerabilities of exposing our collective intellectual processes. What emerged was this joint autoethnographic account of an event, which fuses subject and object, process and product, and diarist, author, and editor iteratively (cf. CHANG, NGUNJIRI, & HERNANDEZ 2013). The panes intersect through overlapping materials but approach the same phenomena from different perspectives. In this way, I, you, s/he are in motion. To help the reader, the authors have used their first names and the first-person pronoun "I" when writing. Where first names appear elsewhere, they refer to our fellow diarists, unless otherwise noted. We have maintained our individual writing styles to produce a textured collaborative piece.

The first section, or "pane," of this text explores this writing/being/thinking modality. In "'Seafaring' from COVID-19 and 'Surfing on Time' through Autoethnographic Diary Writing," Vaida Norvilaitė contemplates collective diary keeping as a tool of observation, employing two marine-themed metaphors. While "seafaring" guides through the blurring boundaries between the life-threatening waves of COVID-19 "out there" and secure lives on "dry land," "surfing on time" helps to contemplate autoethnographic writing in the form of a diary as such. This piece is followed by a trilogy of critiques on the policies and practices used to arrest the spread of COVID. Juliana Beecher's section, "'Masks Required for Entry': Material Engagements with a 'New Normal,'" reflects on the many place- and time-specific meanings of wearing face masks. Lee Brando's piece, "The Social Contract

Calls for Social Distancing: Negotiating Rules of Engagement During a Pandemic" indicates a paradox created by social distancing and the dilemmas that arose from disunified and muddled policies in the United States. Taking up the related practice of hygiene, yet casting it within the scope of multispecies coexistence, Sonia Yuhui Zhang's "pane," entitled "Coexisting with COVID: Daily Practices of Cleaning, Disinfecting, and Imagining in a Global Pandemic," gazes between diary entries to explore relationships between people and their positions in the biosphere during the pandemic. Together, these pieces, forged from a type of dynamic collaboration, both illustrate and instrumentalize the fluidity of relationships emerging from a crisis.

### **Pane 1: "Seafaring" from COVID-19 and "Surfing on Time" through Autoethnographic Diary Writing**

Longing for Informants and Collective Diary Keeping

Anthropologists are trained to be immersed, to be at the forefront, and to expose themselves to the onrushing waves of the unknown. Emerging as an invisible tide, COVID-19 surreptitiously transformed from a shallow undercurrent into a full-fledged tsunami. By no means resembling emergency flood workers, a handful of The New School for Social Research (NSSR) anthropologists found themselves positioned as remote spectators, often envisioned as the dream of philosophers – a privilege of observing "the distress of those at sea from the safety of dry land" (BLUMENBERG 1997: 2).

Although most of the coronavirus pandemic microbial "storms" are taking place on the ground, this essay engages with two nautical metaphors: HANS BLUMENBERG's "seafaring" (1997: 2) and PHILLIPE LEJEUNE's diary-keeping as "surfing on time" (2009). Throughout its rich history from Homer's *Odyssey* to Christian iconography and beyond, the sea often represents a place of danger, "where evil appears." In times of anguish, notes BLUMENBERG, the sensation of perilousness on the high seas "serves to underline the comfort and peace, the safety and serenity of the harbor" (1997: 7). This piece accordingly deploys BLUMENBERG's "seafaring" to navigate the space between

the life-threatening waves of COVID-19 “out there,” and secure lives on “dry land.” Lejeune’s “surfing on time” depicts a specific awareness of temporality, unfolding through autoethnographic diary writing.

The metaphor of shipwreck is also detectable in the public discourse around the coronavirus. RICHARD GUNDERMAN (2020) compares sheltering in place during the pandemic to Crusoe’s shipwreck as it suspends established habits and rhythms of life. On rare occasions, the aforementioned anthropologists braved dipping their toes into the allegedly abating waters of the pandemic by stepping outside their apartments, which served as cells of social confinement. Their excursions ranged from stocking up on necessary supplies or visiting laundromats to enrolling in the “Meals on Wheels” program or acts of care such as mediating neighbors’ domestic violence episodes and visiting friends in need. Not to mention more reckless endeavors such as clandestine rafting in the white waters near Portland or crossing the entire East Coast from New York to find repose in Mississippi. The stimuli outside spiced up monotonous days on “dry land” and led to encounters with longed-for “informants.” I (Vaida) recall the rush of anthropological excitement when a cashier at Walmart in Lucedale, Mississippi, bluntly stated that the economic collapse does not frighten her since she owns stock in Amazon.

However, little as the anthropologists anticipated, their most crucial informants were not the coincidental interlocutors of the external world, but the diaries they shared. Collective journaling in a time of pandemic served as a means to fill the void of real-life anthropological engagement by equipping the group with a birds-eye-view tool of observation. They/we were captivated by the observation of time stopping, breaking and re-starting, moments of despair and grief, and finding stillness in madness in the shimmering glow of communal mundanity.

#### Crisis Diary as “Surfing on Time”

In one of his first diary entries on the 15th of March, 2020, Nicolas, a professor in Anthropology, drew a parallel between the beginning of the lockdown and World War I: back then, “everybody was excited because, finally, something was

about to happen. Today, everybody is excited because, finally, nothing happens. Time will come to a stop.”<sup>2</sup> The surge of diaries is also a common denominator between the COVID-19 pandemic and the period of World Wars. Journaling in times of distress, periods of both personal and global crisis, observes KATHERYN SEDERBERG, offers “a possibility for thinking about the present moment in the face of defeat, as the future opened up and one has the feeling of living through history” (2017). Diarists are stuck in the presentist moment of self-reflection, as they “cannot narrate their lives from the point of relative stability, looking back.”

The paradox of diary writing is its “stuttering forward movement: the present of the diary is both continuous and continually interrupted” (SEDERBERG 2017). On the 30<sup>th</sup> of April, a fellow diarist, Lee, reflected on how writing changes together with new events unfolding: rising mortality rates, the domestic violence episode between her neighbors, and her friend being sick with an undiagnosed disease. “This diary is turning into a personal morbidity and mortality report. I write as my partner is still sleeping. When she awakes we are going over to our friend’s. Yesterday we received a call indicating that my friend Leslie<sup>3</sup> was vomiting uncontrollably again.”<sup>4</sup>

Diarists are similarly frustrated by the minuscule number of things that can happen each day and how incapacitating this slow unfolding of events feels. On the 30<sup>th</sup> of March, Juliana engaged in quite an unusual activity for a New Yorker. Having returned to her house in Vermont, she was in the midst of boiling syrup when a Kafkaesque realization of meaninglessness slipped in: “We boiled sap for 11 hours on Saturday. 10 gallons of syrup. Friends came over, all the same people who we decided, weeks ago now, to isolate with, as a closed group. [...] We made waffles and poured on syrup straight from the evaporation pan. Bloody Marys and Coronas turned into Micheladas. It felt like any other spring day in Vermont. Except for the conversation, the hopelessness.”<sup>5</sup>

Twelve days later, on the 11<sup>th</sup> of April, Juliana contrasted the continuously changing months and seasons of the year to the destabilizing moments of numbness: “It’s been snowing since Thursday. ‘April is the cruelest month, breeding/lilacs out of the dead land, mixing/memory and desire’...I’ve

been trying not to give in to the drag of memory, the hopelessness of planning for the future.”<sup>6</sup>

PHILLIPE LEJEUNE compares keeping a diary to “surfing on time” (2009: 182). “Time is not an objective, continuous thing that the diarist tries to portray from the outside using tiny discontinuous brushstrokes, as a novelist would. He is himself caught up by the moment, he is sculpting, moving along with it, emphasizing certain lines and directions, transforming this inescapable drift into a dance” (2009: 182). LEJEUNE also refers to the image of “surfing on time” and the “thrill” of the diary as “the feeling of touching time” (2009: 209). Fellow diarist Sonia’s writing similarly plays with time: its idleness, its feeling of stretching out, and then shrinking back again. This playfulness, however, is marked by the sense of despair and the absence of foreseeable closure. “When I am awake, I spend a lot of time staring at my roommate’s cat, crying a little bit when I want to,” Sonia wrote on the 27th of April.<sup>7</sup> A few days later, she went through a period of intense gaming, meshing multiple days into one blurb of time:

On Tuesday I started the game “Ancestors: The Humankind Odyssey” and have been unable to stop. I probably slept for about 15 hours in total over the last four days. In the game I am an ape - or a clan of apes - in prehistoric times trying to survive the jungle, pass generations, and eventually evolve into other hominid species. [...] After four days of almost non-stop playing I am still at a very elemental level in the game; my school work is lagging behind and I am rushing through my readings and writings; there is no way I could play this game in a normal semester.<sup>8</sup>

Diarists were eager to go home, commence their fieldwork, or resolve financial difficulties. However, as time passed, they were struck with the realization that a return to normality was not apparent on the short-term horizon. The mundanity of diaries, categorized with timestamps, argues JENNIFER SINOR (2002), helps to create a “fiction of stability” and imitate the making of order to counter external chaos. Similarly, Dana was battling messiness, like Sisyphus, while seeking refuge from the pandemic in her mother’s house with her husband and two children: “I’ve lost count of how many times I’ve put away the same toys. Why do I even put them away? I like order. There is no

order in this.”<sup>9</sup> After all, the most desired outcome of the crisis diary is its end – “searching how to get out of the crisis, and as a consequence, out of the diary itself” (LEJEUNE 2009: 195). In other words, waiting for the surf wave to break and wash one to the shore.

### Failed Attempt of “Seafaring”

Besides surfing on time waves, anthropologists are navigating their positions as remote observers. BLUMENBERG centers his renowned piece *Shipwreck with Spectator* on the detachment and security of the viewer’s perspective on the shore, allowing them to contemplate the catastrophe from afar. He historically traces the literary tropes of “seafaring” and “shipwreck” for his broader project investigating metaphors as contributing to the nonconceptual underlay of philosophy. Indicating multiple perspectives of a disastrous event, BLUMENBERG’s piece also interestingly interconnects with the current “privilege” discourse in academia. In the context of the ancient philosophical attitude of theories, BLUMENBERG shares an anecdote of Socratic philosopher Aristippus being shipwrecked on the island of Rhodes, where he re-evaluates the perils of a philosopher’s life over pleasure and money:

Even in the hopeless situation of being shipwrecked on a foreign shore, a philosophically trained person still knows what to do, when he recognizes civilized reason in geometrical diagrams and thereupon decides to proceed immediately to the city’s gymnasium and earn through philosophical disputation what he needs to restore his lost outfit (BLUMENBERG 1997: 12).

In a later moment of epiphany, Aristippus teaches the homebound passengers that “one ought to provide one’s children with only such possessions as could be saved from the shipwreck, for the things important in life were those that neither the trials of fate nor revolution nor war could harm” (BLUMENBERG 1997).

Further in the booklet, BLUMENBERG similarly refers to the French Renaissance philosopher Montaigne and his position towards seafaring:

Montaigne does not justify the spectator of shipwreck by his right to enjoyment; rather, he jus-

tifies his pleasure, positively described as malicious, by his successful self-preservation. By virtue of his capacity for this distance, he stands unimpaired on the solid ground of the shore. He survives through one of his useless qualities: the ability to be a spectator. The shipwreck man comes out of the catastrophe unharmed (1997: 17).

BLUMENBERG suggests that our actions during a crisis partially depend upon our perception of proximity to disaster.

On the 30<sup>th</sup> of April, during one of the many remote Zoom lectures, this time on the subject of loneliness and solitude, MASHA GESSEN (2020) aptly commented on the prevailing impairment of academics to successfully self-preserve: “Philosophers, people whose job is to imagine the future, are lonely. The idea that we might change the world is not self-evident. This situation should be a philosophical dream, but it isn’t. The overwhelming sense that the world has emptied is debilitating.”

Responding to GESSEN’s remarks, ANN STOLER (2020) piped up in the chatbox: “The fact that academics and intellectuals aren’t able to use the privilege of this time for our work feels as if we have been exposed to ourselves, that the projects we thought so important, that the ‘work’ we so value is often an affect that we perform for ourselves. We got caught in the privilege and the protections that we have built around our lives.”

Whether coping with the unimaginable, feeling trapped in the “privileged” structures of academia, or being caught up in the cage of loneliness instead of the intended action of solitude, most of the diarists shared similar sentiments of uncertainty and stuckness. Multiple entries referred to the inability to concentrate or deal with endless to-do lists, the inclination to postpone tasks to the last minute, or simply feeling like a failure. Cedric on the 17<sup>th</sup> of April, wrote:

Every day I wake to see techno-optimists celebrating their delivery cocktails, celebrating the #silverlining. We are told the prosthetics are as good, if not better, than the real limbs with which we embraced one another. If we have the “privilege” of staying at home, then we must be “productive.” Save lives, stay at home, produce content. Salute the heroes, grief is unamerican.<sup>10</sup>

A wave of relief washed over me when I read everyone’s diaries for the first time. I was swimming through the fine lanes of poetic dream-like states of Sonia’s reality and was at ease with myself realizing that I am not the only one who cries. I could taste the sweetness of Juliana’s freshly boiled syrup drowning the fluffy waffles. I was forcefully spat ashore by the domestic violence episode Lee witnessed and drained my wounds with those unravelling their relationships and sinking in the sea of grief and anxiety. By failing in our attempt of seafaring, as Nicolas writes on the 20<sup>th</sup> of March, we discovered “the sense of interconnectedness which ‘humanity’ experiences in the face of a common enemy,” and found ourselves bathing in “a warm glow of every day,” watered by the stream of consciousness of our diaries. Nevertheless, Nicolas added that the political situation, the scarcity of financial and medical resources, and other tears in the social fabric might still pull us apart.<sup>11</sup>

## **Pane 2: “Masks Required for Entry”: Material Engagements with a “New Normal”**

In the weeks leading up to New York City’s lockdown, store shelves for hand sanitizer, gloves, canned foods, and toilet paper were empty, and diarists/ethnographers in the city wrote about precious disinfecting wipes (the fear of wasting even one!). But it was the face mask that emerged saturated with meaning: scarce commodity, uncomfortable necessity, barrier-turned-accessory to intimacy, symbol of mutual obligation, indicator of political affiliation, and an iconic object of the COVID-19 pandemic. In a multispecies world, face masks also became hopeful boundary markers between the human and the microbe.

Masks are a tried-and-true tool in disease outbreak mitigation. The modern medical mask was invented in northeast China during the pneumonic plague that began in 1910 and was adopted globally during the Spanish Flu in 1918 (ABDELFATAH & ARABLOUEI 2020). In cities where air pollution increased in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, masks became standard accessories to avoid exposure or exacerbated respiratory illnesses, protective barriers against adverse environmental conditions. In more recent epidemics, they became symbolic of public responsibility and care. As medical an-



thropologist CHRISTOS LYNTERIS notes, wearing a mask in China, Hong Kong, and other areas during the SARS epidemic was a symbol of civic duty, public health awareness, and acknowledgement of a shared fate, messy coexistence, and mutual obligation (2020). Masks were worn out of courtesy and care for others more than fear of contagion. Sonia wrote in her diary that, “people at home [in China] wear them when having a common cold.”<sup>12</sup> Indicating how ordinary masks are, she continued: “some of my female friends put on a mask simply when they are not happy with their looks.”<sup>13</sup> But the normalization of masks was slow to develop in the U.S., and remained a topic of scientific and political debate.

As “stay-at-home” orders swept unevenly across the country in March, some people embraced recommendations for mask use and social distancing; others flouted them. Governmental leaders and public health officials issued confusing and often contradictory information regarding the efficacy and necessity of masks. When venturing outside, some of the diarists noted how many people wore masks, their sense of safety corresponding to the ratio of masked to unmasked faces on the street and in shops. President Donald Trump refused to wear a mask, perhaps realizing his powerlessness as masks became constant reminders of the severity of the COVID crisis. In contrast, New York governor Andrew Cuomo mandated facial coverings in public. Inconsistent messaging from authorities, and a particular ideological brand of American individualism that refuses governmental interference in personal life, made mask wearing a matter of discretion, especially beyond the epicenter. Essential businesses often required them for entry, and occasionally customers resisted, proclaiming their personal freedoms in videos that became viral flashpoints. Masks became symbols of group affiliation: the tribalism of Trump’s America. Intentionally or not, donning a mask meant acknowledging the severity of the COVID crisis, the scientific expertise of public health authorities, and a responsibility to protect one’s community. *Not* wearing a mask became a symbol of disbelief in that scientific expertise and loyalty to a president who consistently downplayed or denied the threat of the coronavirus. Masks became political statements.

In the early days of COVID-19, masks were challenging to procure. When Isabel tried to purchase disposable masks, she encountered inflated prices: a box of 50 masks usually costing \$12.49 at a pharmacy, was sold for \$40 at a supermarket; and, it had to be requested from behind the counter. (She opted to purchase a cotton mask online.) Hospitals stockpiled personal protective equipment (PPE), and required doctors and nurses to reuse normally disposable N-95 masks. Hesitant to force U.S. manufacturing to produce PPE, the federal government arranged a series of flights on privately-owned planes to transport masks and other supplies from China to New York hospitals (HOLLAND 2020). Procuring the means by which to maintain the human/microbe boundary became a central focus for individuals and governments.

As a result of shortages, mask ingenuity proliferated. Just as distilleries adapted their production lines to make hand sanitizer, apparel companies turned to making masks. Crafty volunteers sewed masks for mutual aid networks and hospitals. As I (Juliana) noted in my diary, designs for homemade masks abounded online:

[P]ossible features: pleats, a curved front, pocket for a filter (e.g., cut-up vacuum bag), wire sewn in to go over your nose (...to keep [glasses] from fogging up), elastic, cotton ties, shoelaces...The CDC suggests just folding a piece of fabric in a certain way and using two rubber bands or hair elastics to hold it over your ears (CDC 2020). Cotton is always the recommended material, the tighter the weave, the better.<sup>14</sup>

Museums and archives around the world began collecting homemade masks as part of COVID-19 documentation projects (YONG 2020), and planning for future exhibits when such essential artifacts could be moved from daily use to exhibit halls (HESTER 2020).

Ad-hoc facial coverings—like a T-shirt collar pulled up over the nose—also appeared. Isabel traversed the Williamsburg Bridge, passing other walkers, and “saw a lot of creativity in the face masks: disposable ones, cloth ones, handkerchiefs, scarfs, people wearing whatever thing they have...”<sup>15</sup> Vaida wrote, cycling through Brooklyn: “The sea of mouthless faces, covered with all sorts of masks, merged into the background of the invisible tunnel of motion that I was in. Dispens-

able blue, and minimal black masks, repurposed scarfs, and trendy ones with ornaments or floral prints.”<sup>16</sup> Masks started to become details in the backdrop of COVID, that might, in the future, help to date a photograph—obvious reminders of the ever-present viral threat.

Most significant to the diarists was the way in which masks mediated or obstructed interactions with other humans and their environments. Wearing a mask could come with initial feelings of discomfort or frustration, but a sense of mutual obligation often triumphed. Lee wrote:

I honestly despise wearing a face mask outside, and whenever I am far away enough from people I move it to around my neck. It is difficult to breathe...[t]here is no feeling of fresh air, and my vision is also occluded. So the walks outside on a lovely sunny day are now dampened by protective gear...I understand why, the sirens outside my window remind me.<sup>17</sup>

Lee wore a mask despite the discomfort out of a sense of responsibility to her community, which, in the time of COVID, could feel both hyper-local and overwhelmingly global. This sensation—stifled breath, muffled voice—mirrored the restrictiveness of “stay-at-home” orders and renegotiation with the viral, intimate, and collective spheres of daily life.

Mask wearing sometimes led to interpersonal tensions around risk tolerance. Sonia, who was used to masks, wore hers even inside. When her roommates asked if they should mimic her precautions, Sonia felt guilty, like she had “imposed some unfair standards onto them.”<sup>18</sup> Masks were just one piece of a more extensive network of objects and practices that individuals and groups had to learn to navigate in order to share space and maintain social relationships, while avoiding viral intimacy. When Isabel and I met in a park in May, we had the double barriers of social distance and masks. Pre-COVID, we would have embraced enthusiastically, sat close, maybe shared food. The lack of normal intimacy and loss of full facial expressiveness made it difficult to remember how to talk together, be together.

Early in the pandemic, masks often felt like a barrier to intimacy, but with the passage of time, they came to be *enablers* of in-person interaction. I left New York in the middle of March to join my

partner in northern Vermont and began delivering meals to elders in the community. In my flowered mask, I struggled to connect with meal recipients: “I’m realizing how much I rely on people being able to see the lower half of my face as I empathize with their stories of chronic fatigue and bones aching in the rain, or smile at their jokes.”<sup>19</sup> But as the long *durée* of COVID-19 sank in, the initial shock of pandemic life was replaced by the need for sustainable social practices, and masks became a symbol of the current version of “normal.” As businesses began to reopen, masks, outdoor locations, sanitizing, and physical distancing allowed for in-person interactions, a welcome alternative to screen-based socializing. In New York City, masks became almost comfortable and could be seen hanging around necks or dangling from ears, always at the ready. This easy wearing mirrored the narrative arc of past epidemics when masks were sometimes worn less meticulously, almost as “amulets” (SONCUL & PARIKKA 2020), demonstrating varying levels of precaution and fear.

At the end of June, Isabel and I met in a park again, this time sitting far enough away to remove our masks and talk freely. In just two months, this accessory became less strange, its navigation less awkward. We felt empowered to use the full set of tools—masks, spatial distance, hygiene practices—at our disposal to create the conditions of our interaction. And the coronavirus became a more familiar member of our multispecies community, one that required strategic boundary management, not all-out barricades against the world beyond our blurry-edged selves (YANCY 2020).

As the US epicenter shifted away from New York, states that had previously resisted aggressive mitigation took up their masks. On July 11<sup>th</sup>, Trump appeared for the first time in a mask, caving under pressure from his aides as he toured a military medical facility (WISE 2020). On the national scale, though, wearing a mask remains political, and communities and governments go to court over the right to mandate masks (ROMO 2020).

When protests and riots erupted across the country after four Minneapolis police murdered George Floyd, a Black man whose last words, “I can’t breathe” echoed those of Eric Garner, killed by police six years ago, masks appeared bearing

those words, and others: “Black Lives Matter;” “No Justice No Peace.” In crowds, masks gave protesters protection from COVID-19 and a sense of anonymity, mimicking recent pro-democracy demonstrators in Hong Kong who wore black face masks to disguise their identities from security cameras with facial recognition software. The protests against police brutality broke out amidst a public health crisis that disproportionately affected communities of color, with the death rate for Black COVID-19 patients in New York City double that of white patients (CDC 2020). Attention shifted away from the coronavirus toward a national reckoning on racism and violent policing almost overnight. As Vaida wrote, “Corona, the only way you are still visible is the sea of black masks..We wear them to stop the virus, but the masks cannot mute the voices of the unheard.”<sup>20</sup>

As calls for racial equity and justice implicate individuals, corporations, communities, and governments in the maintenance of racist policies, systems, and beliefs, the blurriness of our “self” and “other” edges is fiercely emphasized and examined on historical, political, and economic (as well as epidemic) scales. The “sociality that exceeds each one of us” (BUTLER AS CITED IN YANCY 2020) stretches backward and forward in time, and traverses species boundaries that both define and defy our bodies and environments. Our physiological safety relies on the carefully drawn lines around our physical bodies, made thicker by the two-meter-rule, as if drawing over the lines with a fatter marker tip. And yet, even despite our efforts, the coronavirus crosses these lines, revealing them to be, as always, opaque, porous. And so, in putting on masks, we try to shore up those boundaries—stuff in a piece of tissue as an extra filter, add a pair of gloves—as if it is our civic duty to maintain that barrier between self, other, and the air in between. But we employ our masks’ materiality—their patterns or graphics, how we handle them, how much we wear them—to demonstrate that this physical boundary does not erase our social connections and affiliations. The challenge, for the diarists and others, became maintaining that barrier, while searching out the non-edges that implicate us in each other’s lives. To embrace, even in a pandemic, as George Yancy pleads, “an ontology of no edges,” and the ethics of mutual care that follows (2020).

Even through the personal tensions or sweaty discomfort of masks, a sense of care and civic duty, of acceptance of scientific expertise, won out for the diarists. Masks demonstrated ethnographic care in the same way as keeping and sharing diaries: proof of our engagement with this moment; awareness of our positionality as privileged enough to go out in public; to observe; to use our judgment and the tools at our disposal to keep ourselves and each other feeling safe (as Lee discusses in the next section); to inhale the contagious world in all its flavor and chatter through a cotton weave, a baby blue gauze. To draw one boundary line while breaking down another: reaching across the abyss of physical distance to share diaries, to blur our edges together in collaborative auto-ethnography.

### **Pane 3: The Social Contract Calls for Social Distancing: Negotiating Rules of Engagement During a Pandemic**

#### **The Pandemic Presents a Paradox**

Recent media coverage has highlighted how the US response to COVID-19 indicates a defunct social contract (VIRUS LAYS BARE 2020; WE THE PEOPLE 2020). Considered a cornerstone of liberal democracy, the social contract yields an exchange of individual freedom for security, whereby the government is the arbiter of relations among a collection of people. Critiques of the social contract abound, pointing to its colonial history, its false dichotomy of nature and politics, and its humanist perspective that is myopic in scale and time, effectively perpetuating social inequalities and aggravating ecological calamity. In this way, MICHEL SERRES posited the idea of a “natural contract,” which does not place humans outside of nature or maintain divisions and hierarchies of human and non-human, subject and object, and owner and owned; rather he conceives of dynamic symbiotic relationships within nature (SERRES & MCMARREN 1992; SERRES 2006).<sup>21</sup> Similarly, TOBIAS REES implores us to rethink the political, and along with it, our separation of the human and nonhuman in light of COVID, which blurs distinctions that derive from a conception of the modern. Placing a fine point on the temporal boundedness of this differentiation and the catastrophic effects



to both the planet and the people within it, he argues that we should shift away from a “politics of difference,” to one of the “microbiocene,” that is, from the microbial outward (REES 2020).

Likewise, it seems especially preposterous, even violent, to discuss the social contract when not only COVID-19, but an enduring, illiberal state of police brutality and a recent conflagration of related protests have irradiated our view of structural inequalities and institutionalized, extant, and lived racism in the United States (and globally). COVID-19 further foregrounds inadequate infrastructural preparedness evident in the 20% decrease of spending over the past three years to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and an insufficient amount of supplies (e.g., personal protective gear, ventilators, testing equipment) (MILMAN 2020). Moreover, endemic structural inequalities indicated by the CDC reveal enduring and fresh manifestations of the biopolitical with disproportionately higher morbidity and mortality for African Americans and Hispanics/Latinos and an increased willingness to expose certain groups under the moniker of “essential worker” or “hero” (FOUCAULT 2003; GIDLA 2020; NEW YORK CITY HEALTH 2020; SCOLAS 2020). These deficits have been met with calls for health and financial support by all levels of government. At the national level, the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, passed in late March, provided over two trillion dollars in a patchwork of economic stimulus, loans, deferred and adjusted tax payments for individuals, businesses, and states; medical supplies, services, and research; nutrition services; and support for higher education (US CONGRESS, HOUSE 2020); however, concerted efforts toward rapid testing and tracing and unified policy for social distancing have been lacking. With respect to social distancing and mask-wearing the executive branch under Donald Trump has sent mixed messages; therefore, states have had to implement their own policies.

The social contract’s continued deployment in the media, its rather unique application within the US federalist system of government (whereby powers are at times separated or shared by the national and local authorities), and its particular enactment in New York during the spring of 2020 warrants our attention. Therefore, this sec-

tion will examine a specific application of the social contract: social distancing policy promulgated by the New York state government during the height of the first wave of the epidemic. Using policy guidelines and ethnographic evidence from our diaries I identify a paradox: that the social contract, a mechanism devised for living together, was reimagined to keep people apart through social distancing.<sup>22</sup> Our interpretations of policy through everyday decisions presented dilemmas about social responsibilities that are remote, invisible, and intangible yet also proximal in terms of social interactions, relations, and obligations. In other words, disunified policy shifted the onus of interpretation onto the individual, whereby the combined individual risk and specter of mass infection required continually confused decision-making regarding personal proxemics. These predicaments instigated both internal conflict and social friction as social distancing decisions were subject to surveillance of self and nearby others.

### Social Distancing Recruits Biopower

Social distancing is not a new term but was recruited into our everyday parlance as a decree and a plea. Unlike Germany, India, Israel, Italy, or Spain, uniform country-wide lockdown orders were absent in the United States – a country that encompasses only 4–5% of the global population and in May accounted for almost a third of the deaths from the COVID-19 pandemic (WELNA 2020).<sup>23</sup> Each state issued its own “stay-at-home” measures, and in New York, Governor Andrew Cuomo issued “PAUSE” (Policies Assure Uniform Safety for Everyone). Taking effect on March 22, 2020, this executive order contained a 10-point plan that closed all “non-essential business,” restricted “non-essential gatherings,” and required “social distancing” measures, limiting public exposure and a six-foot (two-meter) space from others when outside the home (NEW YORK STATE, DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH 2020). Issued concurrently, “Matilda’s Law,” named for the governor’s mother, created a subset of “vulnerable” individuals subject to additional precautions (EXECUTIVE ORDER 202.19). These public health standards were instituted with the aim of “flattening the curve,” a phrase that represented keeping the

number of cases from exceeding health care resources.

Indeed, these laws imply a reimagined social contract (KESSLER 2020), where the state mediates social relations through the deployment of biopower *viz a viz* social distancing measures.<sup>24</sup> A \$1,000 fine for violating the PAUSE order, while not insignificant, paled compared to the mounting death toll during the peak in late March. But it soon became apparent that the collective result of social distancing had helped to gradually reduce the rate of new infections and COVID-related deaths during the first crest in the spring of 2020 in New York (SILVER 2020). Social distancing as both a policy and a practice was widely discussed in the diaries – a mode well suited to document a self-regulatory measure. The following section explores the anxieties, dilemmas, and negotiations stemming from translations of social distancing laws as they were balanced against a sense of ethical obligation. In this respect, three themes surfaced: parlaying shared space, emergent or emergency situations, and planned or strategic engagements.

#### Dilemmas Derived from Social Distancing

Parlaying shared space: Everyday negotiations of shared space and resettlement

The diary entries indicated that differences in attitudes or behaviors about social distancing could cause conflict or unity, in other words, factions. Typically, partners in intimate relationships would reach consensus on practice, but clearly, as cited below, that was not always true. Rather, consternation suffused many entries. At times, conflict was internalized, as in the case of Sonia, when she wanted to institute more conservative measures. Having family in China, she was aware early of the virus' nature, its gravity, and the implications for containing transmission through social distancing measures. Her diaries expressed conversations with family and friends abroad (in Shanghai, New Zealand, and the UK) regarding the lax practices in New York as it was becoming the next epicenter. Yet, at the same time, she wished to avoid forcing her views onto her roommates or shaming them into adopting her sensibilities. Alternatively, another diarist, Volkan, moved from his apartment and avoided explicit, interperson-

al conflict when his roommates decided to continue to Airbnb an empty room in early March. His concern about viral transmission led him to resettle in the apartment where both Sonia and Isabel lived. Isabel's diaries reflected both internal conflict about her practices inside an apartment and eventually, external strife with an explicit confrontation with her roommates. Her habit of taking long walks with her husband while her roommates mostly remained inside erupted in mid-May when roommates *caught her* not wearing her mask. Isabel writes rather philosophically on the matter, "Common life is being taken by microscopic identities...isolat[ing] humans from other isolated humans, the invisible murderer is also isolating humans from their own houses." Furthermore, she added, "in this new world of fussiness, those who take less precautionary measures are socially doomed."<sup>25</sup> The first quote reflects a violation of the interior by an invisible invader. This inversion of micro and macro or inside and outside compels an inner negotiation of practice and outer surveillance of others. One's behaviors directly impact the safety of the entire house, and the movements of members of the household affect the broader health of the public outside. The second quote indicates her own social banishment for what she perceives as less fastidious, yet excessive efforts to avoid spreading the virus. In situations of cohabitation with roommates, reaching consensus proved difficult and resulted in conflict or relocation. In this way, interpretation of social distancing removes the government as referee in the social contract and relegates that role to the individual in micro-interactions that have macro-implications.

#### Emergent or emergency situations

Anxious ruminations are also evident in diary entries about the extemporaneous, as impromptu circumstances required a departure from one's *regular* practice and less time for deliberation. As a New York native and mature graduate student with social and familial roots in this city, I (Lee) encountered two situations where my wife and I had to negotiate the ethics of social distancing regulations with concern for a neighbor and a friend. In the first instance, a neighbor was intentionally locked out by her husband for "violating the quarantine." His misinterpretation of policy led to her

seeking refuge in our apartment. However, this raised an immediate dilemma for us to interpret social distancing rules. *Do we allow our neighbor inside when there is an order to avoid this or is this an exceptional case?* We chose to allow her entry since she is chronically ill, and we felt it worse to have her stand in the hallway. Again, we decided to bend the rules when a friend, who lives alone, had acute health issues. Our friend's refusal to call for an ambulance out of fear of going to a hospital and contracting COVID seemed to warrant entry into her apartment. However, doubt and guilt ensued as these ad hoc situations ostensibly stretched into rule violation. For example, our own feelings of isolation resulted in lingering at our friend's apartment unmasked. And our sense of hospitality led to our neighbor touching objects in our apartment like a glass of water and my wife's phone. Such events added stress because they required quick assessments of ethical choices, risks, and decisions. These decisions required continual justification in my partnership, with occasional self-rebuke for going beyond the "essential" act of caring. Clearly, these admonitions intended to reassert the practices of social distancing after they were *un/justifiably* violated. Here again, we see the enactment of self-regulation in lieu of clear and consistent directives through a diffuse social distancing policy.

#### Planned/strategic engagements

In contrast with the urgent situation, the planned event would appear to be a preferable antidote to the social exigencies brought on by COVID's isolation. However, the novel coronavirus has presented shifting facts, policies, and behaviors. Moreover, as demonstrated, translations of social distancing policy are anything but uniform. Here, I use a scenario that Juliana also highlights in her section on masks. In the context of social distancing, it indicates uncertainty even when meetings are planned. The diaries of Juliana and Isabel describe their encounter at Fort Greene Park in Brooklyn. Juliana left Brooklyn for rural Vermont, where she resides with her partner and dog. In mid-May, she made a trip to Massachusetts to visit her partner's family and then returned to New York to pick up the remainder of her belongings and say goodbye to close friends. Her meeting with Isabel and her husband conveyed how

once taken-for-granted social norms had been altered, constraining their interaction. Both diaries liken physical distancing to emotional distancing as a lamentation of what is lost in this hyper-coordinated encounter. Juliana described a reduced ability to "share facial expressions."<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Isabel describes only their eyes being seen, this "friendship from a distance, this placement of rules before physical affection, this disheartening moment of negation, this reality of losing the freedom to love."<sup>27</sup> Strong emotions expressed in these diaries are balanced against muted demonstrations during their time together. This meeting's importance was intensified by the fact that Isabel, too, had completed her Master's in the same program and hoped to return to Colombia. When they would see each other again was uncertain. Comparable examples of precarity were expressed in each of the nine diaries about fieldwork, additional labor/job-related work, vacations, and visits with relatives and friends. Plans were contingent upon the shape of the pandemic, which could potentially shift in a moment, rendering the virus, the laws, and our interpretations coterminous and part of an unwritten social contract.<sup>28</sup>

#### The Social Contract Reimagined Through COVID

Nation-wide infrastructures that included clear and universal regulatory measures were delayed, muddled, uncertain, and contradictory. Therefore, more localized forms of regulation and surveillance accompanied social distancing measures. Around this argument, I close with two interrelated points. The first is on method. As a form of ethnographic material, diaries are befitting here because they clearly illustrate reflections on the management of self and nearby others within a small collective of individuals. They contain a wealth of introspection threaded within narrative events. While there was likely some self-censoring, that is, aligning self-image with some expectational representation, this does not erase their value. Arguably, similar representational challenges are well documented in the pursuit of the ethnographic. Moreover, our diary analysis was augmented with other forms of contact including: cohabitation, in-person meetings, and/

or digital communication (*e.g.*, Zoom meetings, emails, texts).

The second take-away is also trained toward collaboration but casts a wider dispersion. Within the epicenter of the COVID pandemic, as cases and deaths rose to catastrophically high figures within New York during the months of March to May 2020, the porosity of the social contract was undergirded by a marshalling of biopower. This presented a paradox of the social, whereby the social contract was reimagined and called for interpretations of social distancing and negotiated rules of engagement. The diaries illustrated that these subjective interpretations resulted in self and proximal group surveillance; dilemmas and anxieties about decision-making whether everyday, immediate, or planned; heightened inner conflict and group tensions; as well as increased feelings of insecurity. Social distancing policy fused social and individual responsibility, reminding us that our individual fates are tied to the collective and that you and I are mutually bound by a virus. The next section, written by Sonia, incorporates the social but also travels within and beyond it to explore destabilized relationships, interrogated categories, and the forged imaginaries around interspecies boundary maintenance through COVID-related hygiene practices.

#### **Pane 4: Coexisting with COVID: Daily Practices of Cleaning, Disinfecting, and Imagining in a Global Pandemic**

When New York State announced its lockdown in March, the world seemed to have become sparse at first: silence replaced roaring commercial planes, springtime flowers bloomed in empty streets. But it only took a moment for the diarists to become aware of the proliferation of a microbial entity, a contagious pathogen called SARS-CoV-2 that now penetrates every aspect of our daily lives. This cognizance was followed by a heightened need to clean and disinfect, practices that were in themselves nothing uncommon or new: since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, anthropologists have explained hygiene and cleaning activities amongst the array of social rituals that help draw boundaries between the clean and the unclean, the sacred and the profane, the self and the other (DOUGLAS 1966). However, without physical visibility or scientific exper-

tise to confirm and make sense of the coronavirus' material existence, interspecies boundary-maintenance has taken on a particular urgency during the COVID-19 pandemic. Living with social distancing policies, putting on masks and writing diaries in our apartments, we became auto-ethnographers scribbling our imaginings of the virus and engaging in the practice of cleaning in the hope of pushing the pathogen aside. While our diaries reflect confusion and conflict with other people, animals, and uncertain species, they also open a reflexive space to rethink the boundaries we draw and the intellectual traditions we rely on.

The diarists' awareness of the new coronavirus' presence in physical space was apparent from their earliest diary entries in March. "We made every effort to contain the children, we cleaned their hands with hand sanitizers several times – yet some virus seems to have slipped through,"<sup>29</sup> writes Nicolas when one of his daughters had a high fever after a trip to the German Consulate in Manhattan. Although his daughter recovered quickly, he was particularly troubled since his family had fulfilled disinfecting practices that offered promises of keeping the virus away. During the same week, Brooklyn-based Volkan started to feel increasingly insecure at his apartment since his roommate regularly sublet her room. The apartment to him became a polluted space with viruses impossible to ward off: when he moved out, he "armed" himself with hooded sweatshirts, gloves, and masks, and called the items he transferred from the flat "contaminated cargo."<sup>30</sup> Using an analogy from the video game world (the site of his research) where a lone character delivers cargo in a post-apocalyptic landscape, Volkan drew eerie similarities between the virtual land of nuclear waste and his apartment saturated with infectious particles. Unlike his game character who travels alone with anti-contamination equipment, Volkan's life is embedded in a social architecture that is intimately associated with the spread of COVID-19, where person-to-person contacts are now abnormal and implicated with danger.

Amongst the diarists, Isabel, Volkan, and I (Sonia) moved to a three-bedroom apartment shared by five people and a cat. Cohabitation during the pandemic exposed our imaginings of COVID-19, which profoundly changed the affective landscape of everyday life. While Volkan and I felt protected

by wearing masks at home and frequently wiped all surfaces, Isabel disagreed and thought that the series of cleaning behaviors were part of a futile attempt to isolate oneself from an omnipresent entity. She felt consumed by the previously mundane act of using the laundromat:

you search in your pocket for the hand sanitizer to clean your hands that were infected when pulling the door of the laundry / you realize that you are infecting the bottle of the hand sanitizer with the hands that were infected when pulling the door of the laundry / you put hand sanitizer in the bottle of the hand sanitizer hoping to disinfect what your infected hands infected...<sup>31</sup>

Without the ability to identify the virus, every object, and surface become materials for imagining contamination, transmission, and thus mesh into an unclean and unsafe environment. Such imagination translates into the constant pressure of cleaning, the impossibility to distinguish between the personal and the public, and the everlasting preoccupation about and anger towards a viral “other.”

The introduction of self-protection measures did not only affect the way we live in our neighborhoods; it also influenced our relationships with the more expansive urban space, which is harder to predict and control, making the invisibility of coronavirus even more troublesome. While the diarists longed for outdoor walks during sunny days, they had mixed feelings about busy streets: walking to Greenpoint, Brooklyn on a summer afternoon, Vaida described a sense of freedom and joy as “the heat had shoved people from the chambers of solitude into this communal feast,”<sup>32</sup> but felt the scene was somehow inappropriate. Isabel took pleasure in observing a crowded supermarket until rotten smells in the corner convinced her to leave the shop.<sup>33</sup> Juliana observed the bustle of New York City that she missed but also became aware of a restaurant that “looked dirty in a way I’m not used to car[ing] about.”<sup>34</sup> By having second thoughts when seeing scenes they would typically take for granted, the diarists started to reorganize things in public space from safe to unsafe, from clean to dirty. The boundaries between self and others became ambiguous and ambivalent as diarists tried to situate themselves in the urban

environment that suddenly seemed both familiar and strange.

In addition to living with other humans, COVID-19 also made the diarists rethink their connections with non-humans, including animals, plants and the wider biosphere. The zoonotic nature of COVID-19 (SUN *et al.* 2020) has rendered the pandemic as a vehicle for critiquing humans’ violence towards the rest of the earth. Voices condemning human disruption in animal life intensified as mammals were reported to be diagnosed with COVID-19, ranging from tigers at the Bronx Zoo to pets in New York apartments (GORMAN 2020). By affixing mortal symptoms to humans but not to other animals, COVID-19 is increasingly imagined as a representation of the retaliative “nature”: observing dramatic weather changes from her rural house in Vermont, Juliana was compelled to think “nature tried to get us with the big...but now she’ll get us with the small.”<sup>35</sup> The image of nature “cleansing” human influence from the Earth is one of the fantasies of COVID-19 shared by the mass media (CUNNINGHAM 2020), but instead of imagining doomed humanity, Juliana was inspired to rethink her relationship with her community and natural surroundings. As the quarantine made Juliana return to Vermont from the bustling city of New York, her closeness to local communities and observations of striving wildlife and vegetation reminded her of possibilities and losses in her life. Contemplating between her alone time at home and virtual gatherings with friends, Juliana carved a space to develop new visions of how people could get closer physically and how societies could operate locally.

In contrast with Juliana’s optimistic imaginations about a “COVID cultural shift,” Isabel pointed to the potential for the pandemic to induce further environmental degradations. Aware of the sheer volume of disposable masks, bags, and gloves in trash cans and reading quantitative reports on disposable items from the internet, Isabel expressed concerns for the intensified burden of recycling, which in the foreseeable future is bound to impact the biosphere negatively.<sup>36</sup> The frequent use of disposable goods and the social ritual of cleaning replaced more than the long mask-free outdoor walks that Isabel longed for. For her, the equation of disposable goods with safety and sanitation also meant she could no longer take



long treks to farmers' markets for produce free of plastic packaging and to glass bottle recycling centers. To those like Isabel, who were on their way to adopting more sustainable consumption habits, the necessity of using disposable items cut off possibilities for connecting more intimately with or maintaining a more protective distance from, the biosphere. In imagining the earth degenerated irreversibly amidst invasive human activities and carbon emission, temporary revivals of wildlife in urban streets during the pandemic offered little consolation.

Isabel's speculation of a post-pandemic biosphere was cut off by a sudden invasion of ants into her Brooklyn apartment room. Although two distinct biological species, insects and pathogens are both minuscule, irritating, killable, yet impossible to eliminate. In the COVID-19 pandemic, the co-occurrence of virus and insects might have intensified the conflicts already percolating. With the hope of inflicting minimum violence, Isabel and her partner Jose decided to smoke the insects out so the animals would leave the apartment quietly.<sup>37</sup> Against their wishes, the colony migrated to Volkan's room. While Isabel and Jose listened to the sound of ants being sucked into the vacuum cleaner, Volkan thought eliminating the ants was his responsibility, since he assumed their entrance to be the result of leaving a milkshake in his room, a behavior he despised but allowed under the circumstances of self-quarantine.<sup>38</sup> In this case, the double guilt of indulgent life habits and causing animal death worked themselves out through hesitant choices and heightened tensions during the pandemic, an event that would have remained unclear if not recorded by the introspective diaries. A case like this later opened room for reflection: Isabel reconsidered her adamant decision to kill a cockroach, questioning why she is afraid of roaches but not of ants or pathogens causing COVID-19. On what basis do we rank the degree of danger and repulsiveness of other species? Does the term "interspecies connection" mask the specificity of which species we are willing to be associated with? These moments provide rich intellectual materials to reflect on, ranging from conceptualizing interspecies connection to calling for adopting pet insects to foster multispecies empathy (KIRKSEY 2020). However, for the diarists living in the immediacy of contact with an

alien species, they had little choice but to react antagonistically, which inevitably added collateral damage to the diarists' roommate relationships, exacerbating the already too acutely felt disparities between ways of living with other species.

The pandemic introduced SARS-CoV-2 as a microbial entity that people had no choice but to engage with and include in their network of social interactions. Such entry exposes an array of interconnections between people, animals, and the rest of the world. By encountering them, the diarists across the US find themselves saturated with diverse affective states, questions, and imaginations. Amidst these experiences, however, the sense of living in a sparse world persisted. Vaida embraced the solitude of walking in the breeze of the empty streets, yet she felt that the loneliness of New York City had intensified. Juliana's immersion in her Vermont local community was met with a sense of loss when she revisited once familiar places in New York. Sonia, Volkan, Isabel, and Lee's frequent interactions with their roommates and neighbors seemed to create more silence and confusion than solidified friendships. In the sea of multispecies interconnectedness and coexistence, they seemed somehow alone in their practices of boundary maintenance.

Perhaps the question is not so much about drawing boundaries after all. For the shared sense of loneliness is as much a failure to connect as it is an opening for reconceptualization, an acute reminder of the insufficiency of our current assumptions in coping with challenges of the pandemic. REES (2020) and HAYLES (2020) have both explained how bacteria and viruses constitute the very core of human evolution, pointing at a sense of inseparability that calls for rethinking interspecies relationships. Anthropologist of immunology A. DAVID NAPIER pointed out as early as the 1980s that the immune system is as much about "defending us from the 'other'" (2020) as it is about assimilating differences through symbiosis. In this sense, the failures of boundary maintenance in our diaries become ethnographic moments to question these boundaries' legitimacy. By writing and sharing diaries, the direct exposures to each other's interiority at a time when physical contact was suspended opened a rare opportunity for "we" anthropologists to put aside the trope of the solitary ethnographer, and instead to think

about how to engender conversations and produce knowledge by breathing through the same ethnographic materials and writing ourselves out.

## Conclusion

With rampant social inequality and knowledge of the coronavirus far from complete, the nine diaries we draw from move in and out from a particular space and time – New York during the first crest of the COVID-19 pandemic—and extend throughout the United States. This small glimpse might be viewed in specific respects as a microcosm of the imbricated lives we lead. Contrary to Malinowski's famous diary in which he encapsulates bold moral statements inside his private journals to ease his personal tension from long-term seclusion in a strange world, our shared logs brought the ethnographers closer to each other. With the desire for collaboration in mind, the intellectual interiority of the diaries became social material for ethnographic scrutiny and collaborative writing. The diaries also forged connections, provided catharsis through a series of losses, and allowed us to document changes in a suddenly uncertain temporality. The overlap of experiences expressed in the diaries provided a sense of the material, affective, aesthetic interconnectedness of things, the transformative nature of interpretation, and the durability of the ethnographic toolkit adapted to an emergent event.

Classical principles of ethnographic practice simultaneously require the ethnographer to immerse themselves in public life and to acquire intellectual privacy: the immersion in one's ethnographic environment, the meticulous documenting of an ethnographic subject, followed by the detachment from them through retrospective writing (GEERTZ 1973; INGOLD 2014; MALINOWSKI 2007). Keeping diaries during the pandemic initiated an occasion to rethink this model, and writing this text extended and transformed our collaborative process further. Writing ourselves out was extended from a cathartic escape toward a decentering of the "I." Here, we attempted to go beyond our interiors and give shape to global phenomena by representing shifting perspectives, suggesting diverse analyses, and offering an alternative to the solitary scholarship of the stereotypical anthropologist.

Each "pane" separately and together provides a window for examining multiple social realities. In effect, we were pressed to consider and question commonsensical assumptions in public conversations. And in doing so, we realized paradoxes such as the simultaneous desire and failure to cultivate philosophical insights in isolation; the separation of pathogens and connection with people through the collective practice of mask-wearing; the clash of social and individual values in the making of social distancing policies; and the necessity and impossibility of maintaining boundaries from an invisible species. Amongst the emergent literature on the COVID-19 pandemic, there are more and more voices calling for recognizing the inseparability between different individuals, social groups, and biological species. Rather than pressing harder on theories and practices of distancing and separation, this literature suggests that the pandemic has allowed for reconsiderations on the existing boundaries. These claims are not new, but the pandemic provides rich empirical materials to act upon. Our writing is one of those attempts to ethnographically recognize, reflect upon, and rethink individual, social, interspecies boundaries and relationships in the context of a global pandemic, to work towards an epistemological and ontological account and practice of collaboration.

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## Notes

1 There's a rich literature on solitary scholarship versus collaboration. For example, GOTTLEIB (1995: 21-26) argues that anthropology is an inherently collaborative discipline and illustrated much more collaboration among colleagues, partners, etc. than understood.

2 Nicolas 03/15/2020.

3 Leslie is not one of the diarists. Her name was changed in the diary for her anonymity.

4 Lee 04/30/2020.

5 Juliana 04/11/2020, quoting T. S. ELIOT's "The Waste-land" (1922).

6 Juliana 03/30/2020.

7 Sonia 04/27/2020.

8 Sonia 05/01/2020.

9 Dana 03/31/2020.

10 Cedric 04/17/2020.

11 Nicolas 03/20/2020.

12 Sonia 03/29/2020.

13 Sonia 03/29/2020.

14 Juliana 04/06/2020.

15 Isabel 04/19/2020.

16 Vaida 05/17/2020.

17 Lee 04/06/2020.

18 Sonia 03/29/2020.

19 Juliana 04/27/2020.

20 Vaida 06/01/2020.

21 In an interview with BRUNO LATOUR, SERRES expands upon the idea of collectivities, formed of fluid relationship as a "will toward synthesis," which accounts for the intentional and unintentional ties that join and unjoin (1995). LATOUR (2014) later writes about the unattainability of a contract itself because it is lateral and contingent upon agents not actors, imbuing a teleology and fixed subject/object relationship. He promotes a cohesive view of science, nature, and politics engendered in political ecology, which aims to reimagine the political and to examine it in the same critical lens as science (2004).

22 Critique of this term is rooted in the conviction that physical or "spatial" distance is not social distance. My argument does not conflict with the charge that social distancing is a misnomer, but rather reinforces the ill effects of an unclear policy, in effect social alienation. Whether the charge is that it is an ambiguous term, ignored because governments do not engender a rich sense of social responsibility (PRESTERUDSTUEN 2020), or that there are deleterious effects on mental health (DAS GUPTA & WONG 2020; EATON 2020).

23 Sweden's "Nordic individualism" has relied upon "lagrom," meaning "just right," embedded within a social compact that embraces the idea that people will act with a sense of public responsibility. The results have been relatively poorer than nearby nations that took a more centralized approach to managing the pandemic (LEBANO 2020).

24 FOUCAULT defines biopower as the mechanism of the state (institutions, apparatuses, techniques, discourses) to enact control through a form of self-discipline (1978).

25 Isabel 04/13/2020.

26 Juliana 05/17/2020.

27 Isabel 05/17/2020.

28 MICHEL SERRES asserts that the old social contract is both "unspoken and unwritten" (2006).

29 Nicolas 03/23/2020.

30 Volkan "My Name is No Longer Sam".

31 Isabel 03/28/2020.

32 Vaida 05/17/2020.

33 Isabel 04/19/2020.

34 Juliana 05/17/2020.

35 Juliana 03/21/2020.

36 Isabel 04/28/2020.

37 Isabel 05/27/2020.

38 Volkan "On Vincent and Indulgence"; Sonia 05/23/2020.

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**APPENDIX: Excerpts from Diaries**

The following excerpts were chosen for several reasons: because of their reference in the corresponding text, because they spoke to us personally and to the historical moment, and in order to preserve, when possible, narrative arcs that developed within the diaries. These excerpts are unedited to maintain the rawness of the diary form, save for the few places where a date was clarified to help in referencing. Some of the diaries are accompanied by biographical intros, which we've included at the beginnings of excerpts. Full versions of the diaries are available at [boasblogs.org](http://boasblogs.org).

## **“So, everything now is a threat: The door handle, the stairs, the walls, the floor, the shoes...”**

ISABEL ARCINIEGAS

*Yendo de la cama al living / Going from bed to the living room references a Charly García's song that one of my contacts on Facebook declared as her soundtrack for the quarantine; an idea that I shamelessly plagiarized. Maybe the difference is that I am not even going from bed to the living room. I am a Colombian Anthropology student locked down with my husband in a NYC apartment that we share with four human roommates and one non-human roommate. The borders of my country are closed since the second week of March, and the always reassuring thought of going back home if something weird happens in the country where we were living at the moment is not an option anymore.*

*That thought is not nostalgic, though. We used to spend our leisure time in NYC on trips way longer than going from bed to the living room. Our weekly urban walks used to last at least 8 hours; we have been devouring the streets of this city by walking endless miles before all of this happened. Now, we spend 24/7 in our tiny room going from bed to our tiny desk, and then to bed again, and then to the tiny desk again, except when trips to the toilet or the kitchen are urgently required. But maybe I am exaggerating, occasionally we do one of our bestial walks to get even on the absurd trips that don't even reach the living room.*

*Please: My chaotic and infrequent diary is not a reliable source of anything!*

March 28, 2020

Loading a washing machine in the laundry

*How was the procedure?*

You enter the laundry by pulling the door / you search in your pocket for the hand sanitizer to clean your hands that were *infected* when pulling the door of the laundry / you realize that you are *infecting* the bottle of the hand sanitizer with the hands that were *infected* when pulling the door of the laundry / you put hand sanitizer in the bottle of the hand sanitizer hoping to disinfect what your *infected* hands *infected* / you give yourself peace with that thought.

You hesitate to open the door of the washing machine, you didn't bring disposable gloves, you don't have any disposable gloves anyways / you don't want to waste a disposable disinfecting wipe only cleaning the door of the washing machine / you open the door of the washing machine with a right bare hand / you twist your body into a strange position to search for the hand sanitizer with the left hand to clean the right hand that was de-sanitized after opening the door of the washing ma-

chine / you give yourself peace thinking that at least you are not *infecting* the pocket in which the hand sanitizer is / your thought immediately goes away when remembering that you searched in the same pocket for the hand sanitizer with the hand that was *infected* after pulling the door of the laundry, but at least you think it would be the same if you had done that with disposable gloves, you would have needed to search in your pocket with *infected* disposable gloves anyways / Or maybe you wouldn't have needed hand sanitizer at all / you cannot give yourself peace to that thought.

[...]

April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020

### Six-feet away conversations

We went out for a walk, my husband and I. Our initial destination was Prospect Park, so we started walking towards the east, and gradually descending towards the south. Near home, people on the street seem to take the six-foot distance very seriously when a stranger was approaching. If two persons (or couples) were walking on the same sidewalk but opposite directions, it was common that one of them crossed the street to change sidewalks. Before being quarantined, I remember to feel judged if I changed sidewalks when another pedestrian was approaching me. In this case, it seems to me that it was a practice that we all understand and accept.

Home Depot was the first obstacle, the street where we were walking ended there. My husband suggested crossing it through the parking lot. I preferred to surround it, but I followed his suggestion. Immediately I felt sick. It was full of cars and people going in and outside. Almost all with masks and gloves (we have not worn masks and gloves once yet, when will we start using them?) I feel sick, I repeat to my husband, a terrible idea to walk through the parking lot.

Finally the gate, and instantly, I feel better! Is paranoia what makes me feel sick? We keep walking, we find the Pratt Institute. There are a lot of people here, I tell José, I feel sick again. The plan to go to Prospect Park seems distant, so let's go to Fort Green Park instead, he suggests. I accept, but I propose (again) that we should walk down through a more desolated street. My suggestion doesn't work as planned—as we get closer to downtown, we encounter more and more people. There are many with cloth bags, we presume that they went out for food. Others walk with their dogs. Many have exercise clothes, we presume they are going to the same park as us.

"KEEP THIS FAR APART" says a red giant sing, with an arrow that was, probably, 6 feet long. That is how the park welcomed us. I cannot say it was crowded, but there were many people exercising. Dogs were hotbeds of attention or excuses for conversations happening at six-feet distance between interlocutors.

We take a seat at the park over the trunk of a cut tree, and we start eating hamburgers. A squir-

rel is crazy about us, she tries to approach us many times. A rare view, squirrels are too nervous to get too close to humans. We chatted about the impossibility of being immune. Or that's what I want to believe. Is one safer buying ingredients at home through the internet? Still, there are humans behind packing, they may not have masks. They may sneeze or talk over the ingredients they are preparing. Droplets can fall over the food. Or is it impossible to get contaminated if you eat food that it's contaminated?

More than one hour passed, and the park was crowded. It looked like a normal spring Saturday afternoon. No, indeed, it seemed to be more people in the park than on a normal spring afternoon. Lots of dogs, people playing Frisby, others chatting. However, every "party" tried to have the suggested six-feet apart. I tell José that the next time we go out, we better do it earlier.

On the way back home, we pass by a bakery that looks pretty fancy on Clinton Hill. The baker wasn't wearing gloves or a face mask. Again, we encounter strangers talking six-feet away.

April 13<sup>th</sup>, 2020

### House Taken Over

First, it was the face and its holes. To cover the possible entrances of the invisible murderers to the roads of your lungs (lucky those with glasses). Soon, it was the infallible plastic; its polymers supposed to isolate fearful fingers from the microscopic murderers. But the infallible plastic covering fingers was soon discovered as a trick. Plastic fingers can still carry invisible soldiers after touching anything in which the invisible murder is supposed to live. So, everything now is a threat: The door handle, the stairs, the walls, the floor, the shoes, handrails, packages, chairs, the table, cutlery, plates, the toilet (as if the microscopic murderers were to be transmitted through holes other than those in your face). Maybe the only ally is the magic bottle wherein resides the unique hero who will make your wish of security comes true -not this time a genius of the lamp -not this time a sophisticated cleaning product made of fragrant stuff -not this time liters and liters of sodium hypochlorite -but an ordinary liquid called soap. Common life is being taken by microscopic identities, as if more than isolate humans from other isolated

humans, the invisible murderer is also isolating humans from their own houses.

April 19<sup>th</sup>, 2020  
The resignation

I woke up convinced that we finally need to have face masks. We only have a couple that one of our roommates gave us, but that's it. Since the beginning of all of this we never rushed out to buy some, neither plastic gloves. Without touching the face, avoiding being close to strangers, and washing hands as soon as we get home was enough for me. But not for our roommates though, some of them are wearing masks every day inside the house, and I feel it's because of our different incompatible habits scrambled in one single space. That explicit act of discomfort has made me wonder if I am a monstrous walking vector of viruses without a face, or just a careless person, or a monstrous careless person and thus a potential host of viruses using the same kitchen and toilet for their despair. I also don't want to get sick, but at the same time I don't want to get carried away by the collective whirlpool of paranoia. Anyways, some days I am more concerned about keeping my husband quiet with his piercing non-politically-correct jokes that can exacerbate the already tensioned ambiance in the house. But today I came to finally accept that this thing is going to last long, and even if we resume in-person classes, face masks are not going to disappear and I feel uncomfortable with the thought of additional judging eyes looking at me. In this new world of fussiness, those who take less precautionary measures are socially doomed...

Somehow Jose also resigned to the same idea (he has been even more reluctant than me to all of these measures), and he suggested me to go to Chinese supermarkets, because probably there, where nobody wants to go, there are still some face masks yearning to be bought. We have been visiting pharmacies lately to buy some, but we haven't had luck, they are always sold out (the funny thing is that EVERYONE on the street is wearing disposable masks. How the hell did you get to have one anyways?!). Amazon is not reassuring either, packages can take up to six weeks to arrive. So, José's suggestion made a LOT of sense to me, and

we decided to embark in our long walking trip in search of Chinese supermarkets.

[...]

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We have crossed the Williamsburg Bridge thousands of times riding the Subway, but by foot only once. That day was a very cold December afternoon just after finals, and I remember seeing groups of Jewish girls walking through the pedestrian path in animated talks. This time, it's a sunny and warm morning during the lockdown in New York, and the bridge is CROWDED OMG. Runners wearing or not wearing masks, families with masks, individuals with masks walking in a hurry, just like us as we decided to do the same after seeing that keeping six feet apart in that narrow pedestrian path was impossible. At least, I saw a lot of creativity in the face masks: disposable ones, cloth ones, handkerchiefs, scarfs, people wearing whatever thing they have to cover the nose and the mouth. Is walking the new sport? I can't tell because I have never been on this bridge on a warm day, but the strident subway riding besides us looked safer with its cars almost empty of commuters...

\*\*\*

We entered a pharmacy to check on the prices before going into Chinese supermarkets. Of course, face masks were sold out, but we took note of the price tag that was still hanging there: one box of 50 masks costs \$12.49. Good idea to have been there before; when we stepped into the first supermarket the girl at the counter reassured me twice that a box of 50 masks cost \$40. What? Face masks were safekeeping behind a counter next to other pharmacy stuff, they were not at the reach of the hands. Just in case that the girl at the counter gave me an inflated price because of my non-Asian face, I started walking around the supermarket trying to spot the price tag with my own eyes. Bad idea. There was no queue to enter the place, there was no restriction of social distancing, the place was a free entry for anyone wanting to buy stuff. And it was CROWDED. I kind of started finding interesting how their irreverence was keeping their

business alive until I smelt something rotten and left the place not before confirming that the box really cost \$40. Reluctant to pay more than the triple because of the hypochondriasis of the world, we went to a different supermarket with a queue outside. Same face masks behind the counter, same \$40 dollars for a box of 50 units, a man buying one of those boxes and I don't know how many little bottles of hand sanitizer. And my naive commentary that nobody would buy face masks at that price got stuck in my throat...

[...]

April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2020  
A stagnant lagoon

Today I really realized that the quarantine is affecting my academic performance. My way of concentrating and engaging with an idea (an idea of an author or a personal idea) consisted of working little by little every day. I used the breaks between days to reflect on what I am doing, but the breaks necessarily implied an experience in a different physical place. Movement makes me think. Changing environments makes me think. I cannot concentrate without that period of reflection that comes while moving. It's like my thoughts don't go anywhere; I feel they are halted. Movement brings me the necessary maturation time for my thoughts to grow up in something. I spend all my days of the quarantine sitting on my minuscule desk at my room, or over the futon beside my husband and with my back pain hanging all over me. Being trapped in this room, my mind goes so easily to any thought; as if my only way of moving is through my mind going from one thought to the other frenetically. I often remember the figure of the artist working with rigorously discipline in her studio every day, without the need for changing spaces. And I genuinely feel envy of that image. I want to find that. I want to find that sanctuary of concentration. Maybe when we will be living in our own apartment, I keep telling myself everyday...

[...]

April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2020  
The end of the world is not disposable

I saw a photo on Facebook this week of tons and tons of face masks and gloves thrown up over what looked like a beach. At home, things are not different, in the garbage I have seen many times pairs of gloves that probably were worn only once (and only at home). Before all of this happened, I was dreaming of the day when Jose and I could make our own decisions about lifestyle at home, and how it included the elimination of single-use products as far as possible. No paper napkins, no disposable disinfection wipes, no nothing (except, perhaps, for toilet paper?). Back home in Colombia, things have always been impeccably clean with just bleach and an old cloth, and I would like to maintain things like that. Of course, I know that everything you buy comes wrapped in single-use plastic, I know that the medical / food / whatever industry requires single-use products to avoid bacteria and protect the quality of the products, I know that it's inescapable and necessary (I know...) But, anyway, the thought animated me, I was thinking of switching our shopping place, and instead always buying from Farmer's markets with our own bags/boxes and our little shopping car to bring products home (as long as our budget allows it, of course). I was even thinking of researching for a shop where you could take your own glass bottle and rebottle, let's say, milk or apple juice (bad luck for recyclers from my side, I'm sorry). I was also thinking of having our own compost garbage, or participating in communal gardens, and so on and so on...

[...]

May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2020  
The time is over  
(Written in retrospective)

And of course, it exploded. I knew it, I knew from before, and I was sure that Jose and I would be the closest to the blast, of course. That afternoon when we arrived at the apartment and found the AC turned on, that afternoon I realized that our time in this apartment is over; that afternoon felt like a bad augury, and my feelings were right. The ones taking less apparent radical precautions are



the doomed, hence we are. Today, my best friend in NY texted me when I was doing laundry in the morning if I wanted to see her for a few minutes today, just to say hello and give us some precious blood tree also known as Maple Syrup. Immediately I accepted and went home and proposed the plans to Jose, and also it occurred to me that we can ask her if she can take care of our Happy Plant. Since we were thinking of leaving the country as soon as borders are open, we needed to find someone to take care of our beloved plant. Surely if we left the plant at this apartment it will die of sadness and darkness, as the other plants that have inhabited this place have died, as I feel I have been dying slowly over all these months here.

So, we took the plant and went to the living room to do all the bureaucratic stuff of getting ready to submerge in the infected sea outside, but we had the extremely bad luck that everyone was there at the moment. Of course, to carry a plant with us was not common, so we were interrogated, and I had the extremely naïve idea to tell the truth: to say that we were going to meet my best friend. And then we left, not knowing anything that was going to wait for us in our arrival.

So we left, and of course freedom, the most beautiful freedom of the world to let your feet go endless more meters than from the bed to the living room. We walked very fast for 40 minutes to be punctual with our appointment, although Jose started feeling breathless because of our rapid pace while wearing a facemask. We arrived at Fort Greene park and found a hand weaving at us from a distance. It was her! I went rapidly while she stepped in the grass with hands in front of her, like in a warning sign. I understood what she meant, so I asked how we should do this, and she told me that it was better to be apart. I could see her beautiful blue eyes over her flower face mask looking at me, and my own dark eyes became filled with water with that sight, this friendship from a distance, this placement of rules before physical affection, this disheartening moment of negation, this reality of losing the freedom to love. I thought that maybe I will have a similar feeling the first time I see my mom.

And then, we were like in a trade, and it felt kind of funny. She was sitting with her bike behind, and we were in front of her with some meters of empty space between us. The plant and the

maple syrup were placed in that empty space, like offerings: A jar of bronze tree blood for a plant that was “rescued” after being abandoned at the door of our building. Not a bad deal. The strangeness of the meeting melted a little bit when our own friendship made our mouths talk about things that interested both parts. It felt kind of bizarre and sad, but in the end the conversations slowly erased the absurdity of the situation. Now that I write about it, I regret for not trying to enjoy the uniqueness of the situation that surely, I will not live again in my lifetime. But I suppose the impossibility of not being able to hug her was still hurting. We walked together to the entrance of her house and put the plant on the floor while saying goodbye. I asked Jose how he imagines the plant should be feeling right now, and he suggested that maybe it remembered the time when another person left it abandoned at the entrance of our building. I hope this time the plant will be feeling even more spoiled in my friend’s hands than in ours.

And then, we were back at home and the bomb exploded. One of the roommates sat us in the kitchen and basically accused us of attempted homicide of the entire house. First, that she has seen us, through the window of her room, entering the building without facemasks, thus assuming that we never wear facemasks outside. Second, that going to see my friend was not “essential”, and subsequently prohibiting us from going outside unless for something that *she* considers essential; while putting herself as an example of how she responsibly rejected a similar invitation from a friend. In the meantime of the accusations, Jose was reading some letters instead of paying attention to her (brutally and unwise, I know), and something exploded in her and accused us of not being reciprocal with the sacrifices that they have made for us(?)

The face mask box suspiciously pasted at the back of the door of the apartment became the evident and rude and explicit suggestion that Jose and I thought it was the first time we saw it. Just as in life, in this apartment the things that are not shown explicitly are taken as nonexistent, and I remember the Zettel that I wrote for Nick about this. If something is not communicated broadly, if it’s not being marketed, if something is not shown off explicitly, it doesn’t exist. It’s like a shout in the middle of the desert, if “nobody” (nobody that can

count as “essential”) heard it, it never existed. And it seems to me that with the forms of care it’s basically the same thing. If you care, you must show off. In this new reality, the signs of care should be explicit and blunt: if you don’t show up that you care, you are not caring, you are irresponsible, you care a shit about the people dying every day, you are a murderer. What’s the limit between really caring for oneself and others and the performance of showing off that you are taking care? The thought made me feel repulsive.

Of course we have face masks, of course we wear them outside, of course we might take them off before going inside the building to not agitate more our lungs while climbing the stairs, of course we always bring our hand sanitizer, of course we took precautions with our friend, of course we were all wearing facemasks, of course we were sitting apart, of course we didn’t touch... We ended up explaining ourselves. I even justified that we needed to go to the hospital the next day for Jose’s follow up appointment, and she rolled her eyes. In that moment, I felt that my pride was nonexistent, I remember feeling inexistent. And my feelings were corresponded by her: although we assured her that we always take precautions, it was as if one word entered through one of her ears and went outside through the other unprocessed. She didn’t want to listen to us, nothing else seemed to enter into her narrow and fixed idea of what is essential. When we proposed that going to buy groceries might put people more in “risk” at the moment of the interaction with the cashier than in the way the encounter with our friend unfolded, she just responded with a personal example of how prudent she is by always checking beforehand on Google at what times the supermarkets are emptier. When I told her that I need walks because I am becoming crazy (for being trapped in this horrible apartment) the answer was, again, a moral example of how she didn’t prohibit us before from going outside for a walk because she thought that “it *might* also be an essential thing” (and no, she hasn’t been outside during these months to catch some sunlight). Going outside to see a friend (from a distance, she knew it, she didn’t listen) is “not essential”, that our encounter might end up killing her husband who is taking strong immune suppressors—a husband that was sitting at the back of the living room, looking at his

computer as if doing another thing (careless, as always) but of course, vulgarly listening.

While I was listening to her, lecturing us on what things she considered as essential and how we must obey to her criteria from now on, I remember thinking how insignificant is her knowledge of our private life, how she literally knows absolutely nothing of what might be “essential” for us, and how infinite is my desire to keep her as far as possible from knowing anything about us. That was the end of the conversation for me, and I said to her “I learned the lesson” and retired to our room. We opened the computer and bought two tickets for June 7th, with the uncertainty of not knowing if Colombian borders will be open to that date. When we extended our futon and turned off the light, Jose was laughing alone, and if he couldn’t contain himself, and the sight of seeing him in the dimly lit that anxious and emotionally uncontrolled killed me. I understand her fear, but I don’t share it, as I haven’t shared the extreme horror for the virus from the beginning of all of this; and especially as I haven’t been sympathetic to a single idea that comes from her mind since months ago. Our time in this apartment is finally over. And to be honest, it feels like a kind of relief.

[...]

May 22<sup>th</sup>, 2020  
Escape routes

We have to leave the apartment to see our new house for the next three months, and my hands are sweating. My heart beats a little bit faster than normal. I feel I have a fog in my head, a fog of concern. Should I tell everyone where we are going? / *But why should WE do that if they don’t tell us where they are going every time they go outside?* / Should we wait for a moment when no one is in the living room or in the kitchen? / *But surely, we will have the bad luck that someone will go out from their rooms and see us fleeing, like fugitives* / Maybe that’s how I feel now, like a fugitive for going outside. But since we are now the fugitives, the bad moralists, literally the monsters without face masks, we should embrace our new disguise with as much pride as possible. What if we go outside through the fire stairs? We can get off through our window, climb up the fire stairs, arrive at the rooftop, open

the door and enter the building through the last floor. Pray that anyone in the apartment will go outside at the same exact moment when we cross in front of our door on our way downstairs to the street door. Just to pray again that anyone will be looking through the window at the same exact moment when we are stepping outside. We can do the same prayers when we come back, going upstairs to the rooftop, then using the fire stairs, and then entering our room without anyone noticing that we flee this apartment for a few hours ;)

[...]

May 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020  
House Taken Over–Part II

I screamed like crazy last night when I saw a giant cockroach slipping under the toilet's door when I was brushing my teeth. We have been besieged by insects this week. On Thursday, I opened my eyes and my blurred vision saw an army of dark points moving around the window like crazy. Ants! Lots of ants! I have been feeling guilty with two of my roommates for not telling them the truth that we had ants in our room. We felt that if we opened the mouth the mandatory protocol would be to kill them, so we preferred to stay silent and take care of the issue by ourselves. We burned incense, and Jose spent the whole morning harassing them with the smoke so they don't find this place pleasurable anymore to explore. Apparently, the trick worked, but they were stubborn and the next day they tried to reach the dirty kitchen through one of my roommates' window. I tried to ignore the sound of the vacuum cleaner suckling them into the black hole of dust, and Jose reassured me that maybe ants don't get killed by the vacuum. Maybe they just get caught in the tornado with their bodies in one single piece, and once the collected dust is put into the garbage, they might be reborn from the dirtiness, just as the Phoenix (?). I have been remembering those strange stories of wild animals having cool walks in the urban. Maybe is it that insects are feeling that humans are less

active, so they are tempted to explore other territories? Or as one of my roommates jokingly said, maybe they want to take revenge on those causing the Anthropocene. Or maybe it is because it's getting warmer? Or as Jose suggested, maybe they don't agree with what is written in Insectopedia.

My attitude with the cockroach was completely the opposite, and Jose took the dirty job of killing it. Hypocrite my attitude with insects, I know. When I was recovering its corpse to flush it into the disgusting sewage of New York, I couldn't understand why I am so uncontrolled afraid of cockroaches, but not that afraid of the virus. Is it because I can't see the virus? Is it because all my extended family (and I must say, my family is HUGE) are all healthy? What I want to say is that, fortunately, no one that I care about has been profoundly affected by the virus. I might know one or two people that might have been sick of the virus (oh, and maybe myself, I have to write about it!). But I haven't been in "close" contact with the tragedy of the virus, despite living in what is considered now the capital of Covid. Some weeks ago, I read a Facebook post of someone who lives in NY assuring, with an infinite concern, that the city is all day invaded by the sound of ambulances carrying people dying of Covid to the hospitals. But New York has ALWAYS been invaded by the sound of the ambulances, no? It is as if this person is assuming that people are only dying of Covid. As Jose says: After the virus, there are no other sickness anymore.

I remember now lots and lots (and I'm not exaggerating) of messages that I received during April of people writing to me asking if I was ok. My message was always the same: we spend the whole day at home, we don't see the tragedy, I don't know anything. I can have a look at the numbers, but the horror is not personally touching me. Maybe I'm not that afraid of what I haven't personally witnessed... Would I have a different attitude if this thing would personally affect me?

[...]

. . .

**“I couldn’t help but think: nature tried to get us with the big—the hurricanes, earthquakes, tornadoes, fires—but now she’ll get us with the small.”**

JULIANA BEECHER

*I’m a student in the MA program in anthropology at The New School for Social Research in NYC, where I’m focusing most of my work on environmental pollution, seed saving, more-than-human worlds, speculative design, oral history...Before moving to New York for grad school, I lived with my partner, Josh, in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont, and I returned there, to be with him and our dog, Topper, when the pandemic ramped up in the US. I work in the theater industry as a freelance production manager, and have a background in food and agriculture. I love rural living and time in the wilderness, but also love the human bustle of the city, and experience existential turmoil when people ask me, “yes, but which one do you like more?”*

Friday, 3/13/20  
Brooklyn, NY

Coronavirus.

I’m sitting in my attic room, trying to read a novel for class (which will be online today and every Friday, until further notice), and listening to my roommate pace the living room below, talking on the phone. I often listen when he does this, and wonder if he knows I’m listening, if he realizes how audible his phone voice is, especially considering my room has no door, only a narrow sloping staircase. And I wonder if he minds my accidental listening. Sometimes he takes a call in his room, and then I know he doesn’t want to be overheard. Sometimes I put on headphones and play music to drown out his conversation, if it’s distracting, or seems too private for me to eavesdrop.

Today, Jeff’s had mostly work calls. He runs a theater, and an upcoming rental company just cancelled their show, and wants their money back. Broadway went dark last night, other theaters are sure to follow.

Jeff also talked to two friends, who called because we were all meant to have dinner and then go bowling. Talking about plans right now means talking about the coronavirus, and every conversation spans time from the next few hours to next week when the city might be on lock down, to the next 6 months, the amount of time Mayor Di Bla-

sio has warned people to prepare for significant disruptions to economic and daily life.

I’m going back to Vermont this weekend, to visit my partner in the house where I also used to live full-time. I have mixed feelings about going. What I still can’t quite articulate is the sense of being at the center of the world here, especially at this moment of crisis, in a way I never have felt in Vermont, in a small town with slow internet. Metro-centric, I know, and I’m over-romanticizing being self-isolated for 14 days in a small Brooklyn apartment with two roommates who, despite living together for almost two years, are still somewhat strangers to me. The empty store shelves and frantic headlines and jagged stock market graphs do instill a real sense of fear and dread, one I have not yet let myself succumb to, but one I feel, viscerally, with a shortness of breath and a heat behind my eyes, whenever I forget about it for a minute, and then remember again.

Coronavirus. COVID-19.

The shock that some people still misspell it.

It was almost two weeks ago that I first went to the grocery store, the new Wegman’s in the Navy Yard, and took my time considering what to buy for the probable crisis. Cartons of soup, hand

soap, flu medication, muesli, farro, butter, beans, rice, lentils, corn chips, pasta, sauce, popcorn kernels, multivitamins (for when my diet is devoid of nutrients beyond beans and rice). Again, yesterday, Wegman's. Busy even at noon. The shelves holding soap and sanitizers, frozen pizza, frozen chicken nuggets, frozen vegetables, rice, pasta: empty. In the middle of a space usually reserved for displays of weekly specials: four pallets of toilet paper and mountains of bottled water. Why those things? What's going to happen to NYC's remarkably potable water?

Yesterday, I managed to track down some hand sanitizer. Not Purell, but an alternative brand, which, at first glance is "herbal," but upon further inspection contains 75% alcohol (the recommended threshold for effectiveness is at least 60%). I also went to the post office and mailed a bunch of paperwork for a job this summer, one of those future-oriented tasks that seems useless, when so much is more unknown than usual. It's hard to make plans and promises right now. And yet craving normalcy requires persisting in the accomplishment of such tasks as mailing hiring paperwork and searching for post-graduation jobs.

[...]

Wednesday, 3/18/20  
Greensboro, VT

This, too, shall pass. Being here, I sometimes have to remind myself what's happening in the wider world. Being in NYC, I couldn't forget. I don't know which I prefer.

Solidarity is being offered. Google Docs with lists of mutual aid networks, GoFundMe pages, PayPal donation opportunities, resources for those in need or able to offer assistance, grocers, deliveries, housing, shelter, cleaning supplies. Slack channels for organizers and advocates.

But also: urgency right now means staying home. This is only the beginning.

Jose and Isabel got on a train yesterday. We hugged goodbye in the tiny Montpelier Junction station. It was snowing. "I hear New York is a ghost town," said the Amtrak employee from inside her trinket-filled office. The platform was empty except for one other stony-faced traveler, and a little boy who had come to see the "choo-choo" with his

grandparents. Isabel and Jose were rushed onto the train, waving over their shoulders, and calling last words, in a scene reminiscent of the movies: an unexpectedly hurried goodbye, rimmed with grief, danger, and the uncertainty that the parting characters would ever see each other again.

According to Netflix, people have been watching old films like "Contagion" at a record rate. Is it helpful to compare this reality to movies? Maybe fiction is the only place we can look for comparisons.

Josh and I stopped at two grocery stores to stock up on food. The federal government has now recommended that everyone stay home, except for essential activities, as much as possible, and limit gatherings to less than 10 people nationwide, no discretionary travel, and, of course, wash your hands, cover your mouth when you cough or sneeze, don't go anywhere if you feel sick.

My mom (librarian and town welfare director in central New Hampshire) is on the town ICG (Incident Command Group). She seems pleased. My dad continues to work alone in his office. Small, local libraries are offering home deliveries and curbside pickups. Josh's dad goes to and from home and his office/wood shop, alone. Josh's mom is finally, we hope, moving all her therapy appointments online. We worry about her bringing COVID-19 home to his dad, who is in the at-risk category. My mom recently, morbidly, on the phone: "at least most of the family we had who are especially at risk have died in the last year." We count the still-living. Every tally feels like a death sentence.

Saturday, 3/21/20  
Greensboro, VT

The news unfolds quickly. NY, NJ, CA, CT, IL all have stay at home orders. Last night, my roommate, Jeff, had a virtual game night with some friends. Everyone is figuring out how to stay inside, how to pass the time, alone but social.

My niece, Emma (6), has been writing and illustrating a book about the Color Majudul. Her sister, Fanny (4), has had a lot of solo playtime (which she loves). They go on car trips to the beach or the Medford Fells to get outside, away from people (at least 6 feet). Emma and their mom, Lisa, a doctor in Cambridge, MA, both have coughs and other vague COVID symptoms. Lisa got tested at a drive-



thru site in Somerville on Wednesday (or was it Tuesday?). She can't work until they know the results. And if she tests positive, she can still work as long as she's asymptomatic for 72 hours. The same is true of healthcare workers all over. She's been told she's not allowed to leave the state.

Josh's grandmother went into the hospital on Thursday night, and tested positive for COVID yesterday. She was put in isolation, and was disoriented enough not to know what to do with a phone when Josh's mom tried to call. This morning, she's doing a bit better, on less oxygen. I watched the idea of his grandma dying alone, no family beside her, dawn on Josh. An effect he hadn't yet considered.

Also yesterday, his cousin called from NYC to ask about our closest hospital. His wife is due to have their second baby on April 11<sup>th</sup>, and they've been told that there might not be bed space for them, or medical supplies in NYC by then. So they're looking for somewhere else to have the baby, maybe to induce early delivery in order to time the birth around the peak of the pandemic in the Northeast US, which is predicted, currently, for mid-April.

Meanwhile in Vermont, it's that riotous season between winter and spring. Two days ago, Josh and I put skins on our skis to climb up a nearby closed ski area, and skied down. Topper came too. There were about 20 cars in the lot, all folks doing the same thing. But we had the windy, cloud-socked summit to ourselves. When we got down, a classic apres-ski parking lot party was in session. Bags of chips being passed, beers in hand, people perching on tailgates. Not everyone is being serious about this yet.

Yesterday, work in the morning, boiling sap in the afternoon and evening. We made 6.25 gallons of syrup. It was warm, around 60 °°F, gusty, rain showers, then the clouds broke around sunset. It was the dramatic kind of weather-changing-evening that I couldn't stop watching.

I couldn't help but think: nature tried to get us with the big - the hurricanes, earthquakes, tornadoes, fires - but now she'll get us with the small.

[...]

Friday, 3/27/20  
Greensboro, VT

My second round of bread baking was more successful. My roommate in NYC, Jeff, noted that he couldn't find yeast in any stores. I had a hard time finding flour. I like to imagine people all over, quarantining, trying to bake bread for the first time: the failed proofs, the soggy bottoms, the ecstatic, glutenous successes.

So far, Josh and I have been good at finding ways to occupy our time. He's turning wood in the garage today on his lathe. I finished a book, pruned an apple tree, wrote some emails. I'll finish some other projects later, I hope: a baby hat for Josh's infant niece, a wooden menorah made of scraps.

Josh's brother called while out walking his dog in Cambridge. He talked to Josh for a while about us being his daughter's godparents. They're redoing their wills, and trying to decide between us and her mother's brother. Josh assured him that, if the situation arose, we would raise the baby to their wishes, but said we wouldn't be offended if they chose the other uncle. Life often has to undergo rearrangements: if we ended up taking care of a kid, we would rearrange our lives for her as needed. (This, too, is a time that requires rearrangement.) I wonder how many similar conversations are happening around the world, about the type of future that once felt unthinkable but now feels possible.

Saturday, 3/28/20  
Greensboro, VT

[...]

Coronavirus has sent people from the cities to second homes in small towns, vacation towns, like this one. Those towns' permanent residents are fighting back in news and social media outlets, asking city folk not to infect the rural population, to potentially burden their smaller hospitals. I've hoped not to be the person from NYC infecting the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont, but we'll see. I've been coughing a bit recently, and feeling fatigued. But it may be a lack of the social time extroverts like me need to recharge.

Luckily, yesterday was full of virtual social time. First, a meeting with fellow anthropology

students; then a class; then a Zoom call with college friends; then another Zoom call with friends from Ohio. (Zoom stock must be doing well right now.) The virtual happy hour with college friends was the most relaxed - everyone was so themselves. Erin, who's a midwife and on the front lines at a hospital every day, bemoaned being single in the time of COVID, and not being able to have sex for, potentially, months. Jokingly, we all asked Vinny, a computational biologist at a pathology lab in Berlin, if he'd made a vaccine yet. Gwen gave her husband a hard time when he left the toilet seat up in the bathroom, visible on all our screens down the hallway behind her. At one point, Gwen's chair completely broke under her. We couldn't stop laughing.

On the later Zoom call, our friend in Montana told us he and his girlfriend just broke up. He's dreading being single right now. I offered to try to set him up with Erin. We talked about how online and phone sex are having cultural moments.

He read us Montana's governor's version of a stay-at-home order, which mentions that outdoor recreating is an allowable reason to leave your house, but that you should recreate safely, including backcountry skiing only if practicing proper avalanche safety. Outdoor spokespeople, organizations and leaders have been warning people to be conservative in their outdoor decision-making, to manage risk carefully, so as not to overwhelm emergency services and hospitals. Parts of the Appalachian Trail have been shut down.

The Craftsbury General Store, nearby, is letting customers order bulk wholesale items at cost, to be delivered on their weekly truck. Our friend Nina got 50# of flour, 20# each of rice and black beans for her family. Nina came to collect sap with me on Thursday. She's been riding around Craftsbury in the school bus delivering meals to kids this week. Now that I've been mostly isolated for 14 days, I'm eager to start helping. Lots of people around here are also eager to help. It's that kind of community (at least parts of it). Sewing face masks is a popular pastime.

My dad told me about his friend in NYC whose girlfriend is staying with him. She's from Korea, and was unable to fly back when she was supposed to. She's teaching all her university classes online, in the middle of the night.

Monday, 3/30/20  
Greensboro, VT

We boiled sap for 11 hours on Saturday. 10 gallons of syrup. Friends came over, all the same people who we decided, weeks ago now, to isolate with, as a closed group. Some neighbors stopped by to say hi. It was sunny, nearly 60 °F. We made waffles and poured on syrup straight from the evaporation pan. Bloody Marys and Coronas turned into Micheladas. It felt like any other spring day in Vermont. Except for the conversation, the hopelessness.

A Zoom call that night with some friends. They all seem to be coping by drinking a lot. One said that she feels like everyone who's leaving NYC is a "pussy," that she couldn't imagine being anywhere else right now. Another friend was obviously taking the whole thing hard, but joking it off, as she always does. Another talked about the benefits of exercise, and having a dog.

I've also felt the benefits of having a dog. Someone whose behavior seems unaffected by the state of the wider world. Though he is very much affected by the fact that Josh and I are both at home all the time, and he doesn't get as much alone time as he'd like. Lots of sulking and wandering the house whining.

There are two foxes in the woods and field behind our house, not just the one we've been seeing. Two mornings in a row we watched them running and playing in the field. They'll be harder to see once the snow melts out.

Yesterday was the first day I didn't leave the house. Not even to go outside. I made crackers and talked on the phone. Tried to work on some projects. FaceTime with my brother and his two daughters, Fanny and Emma. They were writing birthday cards to my dad (it's his birthday in a couple days). They were goofy, and my brother was patient with them in a way I've always admired. He's been working from home, editing documentary footage for a project for the Basketball Hall of Fame. He went on a long run this weekend, in preparation for an upcoming marathon. It's now become a "virtual marathon," so everyone is supposed to run on their own, and they'll get their swag in the mail. I told him about the article I saw, featuring a man in France who ran a marathon inside his apartment (no treadmill involved).

Today, Josh and I ventured out to get rid of some trash and recycling, and mail packages to our siblings and nieces. The post office, which shares a building with the Craftsbury General Store, had a sign asking customers to stay outside until the tiny room was clear. The Genny has a huge, hand-painted sign advertising their curbside and delivery options, asking people to call ahead, or order on the porch (which I did). A favorite recent Instagram post: "Remember when going to the grocery store was something we did on the way home from doing other things?"

[...]

Thursday, 4/2/20  
Greensboro, VT

Grocery day. Josh and I opted not to bring our own bags, as we normally do. Some places have banned reusable bags altogether, an understandable but depressing turn of events after plastic bag bans have swept this part of the country in recent years. A microcosm of all the regulations the Trump administration is discretely removing in the name of coronavirus management.

We bagged our own groceries, trying to be friendly to the young woman (young enough that she had to call a manager to check my ID for purchasing a bottle of wine), behind the newly-installed plexiglass. People moving about the aisles (and there were surprisingly many) either smiled sympathetically at each other, or fiercely went about their own business. Still no all-purpose flour to be found.

Josh had seen a YouTube video on how to sanitize your groceries before bringing them into your house. Wipe down all plastic and metal containers. Using clean hands, remove the inner bag of cereal and discard the outer box. I scrubbed a colander of citrus with soap and water, thinking about a chef I once worked for. He instructed me to wash the rind of a melon before cutting into it. "But I'm going to cut off the rind anyway," I said. "But your knife will push all the dirt on the outside to the inside. And where do you think melon farmers pee when they're working in the fields?" Between food safety and hypochondria, he saw the possibility for contagion everywhere. So, now, do I.

[...]

Monday, 4/6/20  
Greensboro, VT

My first trip out of the house wearing a face mask, per the CDC's guidance. I drove a delivery route for Meals on Wheels, which provides a daily meal for low-income seniors. It was my first time volunteering for MOW. I got an orientation, and was accompanied by one of the organizers on the route (in separate cars). She made sure I followed protocols and introduced me to the people we delivered to. Because of coronavirus, there are extra protocols for not contaminating the food being delivered, and we're delivering a week's worth of food at a time. The contamination protocols came easily for me. So did the friendly-yet-detached task of arriving on strangers' diverse doorsteps. For one woman, we were the only people she'd seen in a week. Her hunger for conversation was palpable, as she wrapped a wool scarf around her face as a mask, and talked to us through the screen door. She kept pushing the door open, wanting to get closer, then stopping herself. Six feet.

A few hours with a bandana poorly positioned and loosely tied around my face convinced me to try to sew a better mask. Online, the pattern possibilities are endless—many hospitals have been sharing patterns or publishing their own. Different possible features: pleats, a curved front, pocket for a filter (e.g. cut-up vacuum bag), wire sewn in to go over your nose (best for people with glasses, to keep them from fogging up), elastic, cotton ties, shoelaces, or T-shirt material for straps. Some of them are quite complicated. Others are rudimentary. The CDC suggests just folding a piece of fabric in a certain way and using two rubber bands or hair elastics to hold it over your ears. Cotton is always the recommended material, the tighter the weave, the better. Not recommended: wearing medical grade masks or N95's - reserve those for healthcare workers only and avoid public shaming.

I'm grateful to be able to help, especially since it gets me out of the house.

[...]

Saturday, 4/11/20

This has been a tough week. I feel exhausted. And it's been snowing since Thursday. "April is the cruelest month, breeding / lilacs out of the dead land, mixing / memory and desire..."

I've been trying not to give in to the drag of memory, the hopelessness of planning for the future. Yesterday I had to call all my would-be employees and tell them that their summer job has been cancelled. And I had to face the fact that that same job, which would have bought me some time before trying to enter the job market post-graduation, is no longer a safety net for me either. It's getting harder to ignore the future, and harder to use the pandemic as an excuse to not make plans. I keep being reminded: you have to make plans in order to change them.

My laptop, which has felt like a much-needed source of connection, is now a source of anxiety. Sitting down in front of the screen each morning, trying to read, write, answer emails, join a Zoom meeting, plan for final papers or job searches...And it doesn't help that my "office chair" is straight-backed and wooden. Never have I longed for a cushy, swiveling, seat like I do now.

At least the snow allowed for another snowman to be built. This one perches on the back deck, peering in the window, standing in for a friend spontaneously visiting, or the Jehovah's Witnesses who once arrived on that same deck on a sub-zero January day. I was amazed their little car made it up the driveway. This snowman is curious, and looks both puzzled and slightly perturbed. Topper hated him at first. Wouldn't come into the living room because of the imposing figure outside. Now they seem to have made their peace.

I've made more snowmen this year than in recent memory. In a class yesterday, someone paraphrased the book we'd read, *Tristes Tropiques*: anthropologists try to stay children for as long as they can.

Last night, on a video chat with old friends, we discussed the idea that what matters is not that one is good, but that one keeps trying to be better. Two math-minded friends, an electrical engineer and a computational biologist, Vinny, wanted to come up with a word for the rate of change, the movement over time of an individual toward good. (Putting aside, for the moment, the defini-

tion of good.) I watched deer foraging for old corn cobs in the dusk outside my window. Vinny drew three graphs with the  $y$  axis labeled "good," the  $x$  axis labeled "time": a line sloping up, a line sloping down, and a flat line. Maybe each trend needs its own name? Or can all three be encompassed in one name?

"Faith?" the biologist suggested.

Sunday, 4/12/20  
Greensboro, VT

Josh, Topper, and I had a clandestine meet-up with my parents, who live in New Hampshire. We met them in the middle, just across the border, about an hour away. We parked at an empty high school, and walked around the ball fields. Topper found some old fly balls in the woods to chew on, but preferred a stiff, fluffy squirrel's tail, the body to which it belonged having met some other fate.

The primary purpose of the rendezvous was for my parents to give us gardening supplies. Essential agricultural business, we planned to tell the cops, should we get pulled over. The roads were not as empty as I expected. At the border going back into Vermont a large construction sign warned visitors from other states that they were expected to enter quarantine for 14 days upon arrival.

It felt like a treat to be driving on the interstate, after barely leaving the house for weeks. Just the day before, a new record was set for the "Cannonball Run," the drive from New York City to Los Angeles. 27 hours. That will be hard to beat, since the highways now are emptier than they've ever been. I remember the feeling of driving fast across open plains, the freedom that a car brings. Now that public transportation is so restricted, having a car provides a sense of security - not that there's anywhere to go. At the same time, I hate the rural reliance on cars. Last week, the price of gas at a nearby station was \$1.50. Now that Trump and OPEC have arranged for a decrease in oil production, it will likely climb back up.

We talked with my parents about the virus, and how my dad's life hasn't really changed that much. He works by himself in an office, bikes from and to home. He works in environmental waste management, consulting on policies and procedures for treating, composting, and otherwise disposing of solid waste from municipalities. Normally,

“sludge” from wastewater treatment plants that isn’t composted and used as agricultural fertilizer goes into landfills. Those landfills have to maintain a certain balance of dry waste (e.g. municipal and construction) and wet waste (from wastewater treatment). He said that we’re starting to face an unprecedented situation: a decrease in the production of dry waste due to economic shutdowns, which means landfills can’t accept as much wet waste. That waste currently has nowhere else to go, and isn’t part of any state’s emergency plan. This is what my dad has been spending his days thinking about.

My mom gave me a face mask that she made, far better than the one I made myself. She said she chose this one for me because it’s “cheery” and I should wear it when I deliver food in the community. They also sent us home with seedlings, a grow light, and other gardening supplies.

[...]

Saturday, 4/18/20

Besides working in the garden, I’ve been spending less time outside, and less time exercising. I feel it in my body. Today, I’ll spend most of the day outside, moving, not staring at a screen.

I’ve taken part in two rewarding Zoom public events this week, one on the US food system and COVID-19, the other on conducting oral histories of disasters. I appreciated my own anonymity during the 2-hour sessions, the ability to shut off my microphone and camera and watch the conversation unfold, while taking notes or looking up references mentioned by the speakers. I don’t like that I liked that anonymity. But I also felt a sense of community, and was invigorated by the discussions. Talking about the food system, folks were weary of the growing season to come, and the inability of farmers to hire enough workers to plant and harvest, since many of those workers are international migrants, and in precarious positions within the economy and healthcare system. Already, COVID has disrupted food supply chains, not by creating new deficiencies, but by exacerbating pre-existing weaknesses. It’s revealed the food supply chain’s dependency on people. In South Dakota, one meat packing plant is responsible for more than half the state’s cases of COVID, and meat supplies are close

to running low. There’s also optimism that this is a chance to rethink the food system, to make it more sustainable, to undo decades of consolidation, and cut out some of the powerful middle men who make it impossible for the milk being dumped in upstate New York to move, instead, to the refrigerators of food banks in city. Maybe people will become more in touch with where their food comes from, and try growing some themselves. But in Detroit, and other places, community gardens have been shuttered, along with parks.

Another online birthday celebration last night, with everyone taking advantage of Zoom virtual backgrounds to poke fun at the birthday boy. Josh’s computer isn’t new enough to work effectively with the virtual background, so we were simultaneously visible and erased into the photo “behind” us. We weren’t the only ones. Digital ghosts.

Sunday, 4/19/20

On a bike ride today, I found myself counting beer cans along the side of the road. There seemed to be more than usual, and I wondered if it was a reflection of the times, or just the build up over winter, only now visible because the snow has melted. One thing people like about living in this area is its “lawlessness.” Craftsbury, the next town over, voted a few years back not to have a town police force, because the only people they’d arrest would be local people, like the people voting on whether to have a police force. And no one wanted that. It’s rare to see cops on the roads around here, but lately they’ve been more present. State police and traffic control. Some people find it reassuring, others hate it. There’s no political divide that I can tell - some of the most progressive people I know here might drink a beer in their truck on the way home. Maybe the difference is that they wouldn’t then toss it out the window. But I’m not sure. Moments like that blur the political divides that sometimes feel so stark in this country. The other day at the general store, the bulky, shaved-head guy in a dirty sweatshirt was wearing a face mask, while the young woman with a kitten on her shoulder, who I know to be the granddaughter of a prominent progressive activist and puppeteer, wasn’t wearing a mask, and got too close to the pickup window. Those liable to shirk the so-



cial rules of the day come from all sides. That is, I guess, part of the “lawless” appeal of rural living.

I thought of the protests around the country, headed by white nationalists, 2<sup>nd</sup> amendment die-hards, and fueled by our commander-in-Tweets. Those people are so familiar to me. Condemnable for their language and behavior (especially the ones who blocked the entrance to a trauma center at a hospital with their trucks), but familiar. We brushed shoulders in the pre-COVID grocery store. I’ve sat around their kitchen tables, laughed about local gossip, argued about climate change. Sometimes, in a small community, differences are put aside.

[...]

Wednesday, 4/22/20

Josh’s grandmother and aunt are both out of the hospital. His grandmother hasn’t been able to speak for weeks, though she’s been feeding herself. Hopefully a return to a familiar place will help restore some communication skills. Josh’s mom has been beside herself, trying to coordinate care from afar, with all the empathy of a psychotherapist, and all the struggle of family stress.

Vermont is letting some people go back to work, those who work alone or in pairs, or outside where social distancing is easier.

The flurry of social video chatting has dwindled, and I’m feeling more and more the effects of a prolonged shut-down. On Monday, I was as eager to chat with some of the folks on my food delivery route as they were to chat with me.

[...]

Monday, 4/27/20

Today is cold, snow and rain. I didn’t wear enough layers when I went to deliver Meals on Wheels. I shivered as I packed bags out of my trunk. Once, I forgot to put on the Latex gloves (new pair for each stop). Mid-way through the route, my first scary experience of someone not coming to the door when I knocked. And usually she’s the chattiest, already at the door as I walk up. I called her name, knocked a bunch, then walked around the house. Finally, her dogs spotted me and started

barking, and she turned up at the door. These faces are growing familiar, and I wonder if I remember them better, despite not knowing them well, because I don’t see many others to mix them up with these days. One woman always in a leopard print house dress. Another with purple hair. A guy who always asks if I’ve been fishing (I haven’t) and, today, if I knew where he could get “one of those masks.”

On the radio, as I drove around, the governor was holding a press conference. Masks, he promised, will be with us for a while. Social distancing, too. Masks are emerging as fashion statements. And I’m realizing how much I rely on people being able to see the lower half of my face as I empathize with their stories of chronic fatigue or bones aching in the rain, or smile at their jokes.

[...]

Friday, 5/1/20

It’s May. Hardly believable.

Slowly, plans for the future are forming. Summer stretches ahead as an empty space, fillable, promising to be busy as it always is, but with what? A project with a friend who shares some ethnographic interests; applying to a job or two; tentative plans to visit Josh’s family and to host some friends later in the month. I’ve always liked thinking about logistics, and right now they take on new urgency. If we drive to Massachusetts, can we make it on one tank of gas, and without stopping to pee along the way? Are our current isolating efforts sufficient, or are there additional steps we should take before we go, in approximately two weeks’ time? We talk to Josh’s family about the steps we’ve all been taking, our grocery shopping schedules, my Meals on Wheels protocols. (I realize that the people I’m delivering food to are probably the safest folks for me to interact with - they’re all more confined to their homes than we are.) Travel logistics include not only considering routes and stops, but where the virus might be lingering. We’ll be moving from a less affected area to a more affected area. When we come back to Vermont, we’ll quarantine again. Do we buy groceries for those two weeks *before* going to Massachusetts, or on our way back? Do we ask a friend to shop for us? (No grocery delivery service

es in these parts...) Consider: where is the biggest threat? Who do we want to take the chance of seeing? Intimacy has new meaning and scale.

[...]

Monday, 5/4/20

Yesterday, I video chatted with old friends, the social worker, who finally has more permanent housing, and our friend who's living in Mexico. She's still staying with her newish boyfriend and his mother outside of Mexico City. She adopted a street dog as a quarantine companion. Her younger brother got engaged last weekend. She's evasive with her real feelings about his fiancée, but we all agreed it's nice to have something to look forward to.

Saturday afternoon we invited a few friends over to sit on our lawn in the sun. Mostly to let the dogs play. We discussed politics at 10-foot distances. Biden is no one's choice, but voting for him is compulsory. Just think of RBG. She can't make it another four years. Think of our current president, and his suggestions that we all inject disinfectants to kill the virus. (Brad Pitt as Dr. Fauci on SNL last weekend - thank god for parody in times like these. Satire. Comedy. Sunshine.) The argument from his base has always been that they don't take him literally. But it's become apparent that doesn't matter. Think of the violence he's fomented. Maybe he hasn't literally said "Take your guns and go stand outside the state house," but he might as well have, because the result is the same.

I found out that my favorite bike mechanic in Brooklyn lost his 34-year-old son to COVID. I've surprised myself by how sad I am. This is a guy who looks tough—always dressed in black pants, a black button-up shirt, shaved head - and could easily be the kind of jaded, gristly mechanic that gives bike shops bad reputations. But he's not. He remembered my name from the first time I brought my bike in for service, and he's always honest about how he's feeling. He fixes delivery bikes all the time, practically for free, always getting working folks back on the road as fast as possible. Friends of his help out or sit around gossiping and sharing memories of races over the Alps, or last week's ride out Long Island. We chat on the sidewalk as he opens the shop in the mornings, if

I happen to walk by. He was one of the first who made me feel welcome in the neighborhood.

I was reading yesterday about the grief we feel for strangers, how it's often discounted in stories of loss. Like the only losses that matter are our own. But that's been disproven time and again by public outpourings of grief in the wake of migrant deaths in the Mediterranean, or school shootings, or police violence, or natural disasters...and now a pandemic. How to live with that grief, how to fold it into our social fabric *without* discounting it, without trying to leave it behind or inside or below, but let it be a presence in public life, without it being politically instrumentalized - that's the challenge.

[...]

Thursday, 5/7/20

Last night I had a dream that we had gone to visit Josh's parents near Boston. As planned, I drove from there to New York to get some things from my apartment. But I left three days early. After I'd been in New York for most of a day, walking around and grocery shopping with a group of random people (clearly not realizing this might not be the best time to be forging new in-person friendships), I realized what I'd done. My roommate didn't feel safe with me staying in the apartment for more than the one night (for which he would stay at his girlfriend's), and I couldn't go back to Boston to stay with Josh's family because I was possibly infected now, nor did I feel OK about collecting Josh three days early and returning to Vermont, cutting short his time with his family. I was trapped.

[...]

Monday, 5/11/20

I listened to most of the Vermont governor's press conference while driving around today. Every week the same questions: people aren't wearing masks - why don't you make it mandatory? Why aren't you testing *everyone* in nursing homes and jails all the time just in case? How are you counting the positive tests, by town? County? Zip code? Postal route? Why aren't you collecting more data?

Is Vermont going to get in trouble with the feds for pushing through unemployment claims without resolving all the issues? Why the holdup with payments?

All questions I could answer by now. There must be better questions to be asking. There must be better ways for these journalists and public officials to use their time, rather than struggling with un-mute codes and fuzzy phone lines. I got so frustrated yesterday I started yelling at the radio.

We're preparing to visit family in Massachusetts starting on Wednesday. We'll spend a few days there, then I'll go to New York for a night to collect some things from my apartment, and pick up two friends. On Monday, we'll drive back to Massachusetts, stopping briefly in Connecticut to say hello and goodbye to Aaron's parents, who are likely moving across the country before the end of the month. Then we'll pick up Josh at his parents' house, waving from across the driveway, definitely not going inside, not even to pee. Then we'll drive back to Vermont, stopping for two weeks' supply of groceries, before settling in for quarantine.

Five days of car travel to familiar places and it feels like the biggest trip of our lives. More stress and uncertainty than the month-long mountaineering/climbing adventure in Patagonia. Logistics that have never needed discussing: will we stop to use public restrooms? Should we bring an extra tank of gas? Will we fit in the car with all the groceries, luggage, and two dogs? Are we going to be responsible for spreading COVID to the Northeast Kingdom?

Wednesday, 5/13/20  
I-93, NH

This morning I sent in my last paper of grad school, planted some onion starts in the half-frozen-but-quickly-thawing ground, and jumped in the car with Josh and Topper. We drove south on a familiar route, and except for various signs explaining COVID-related protocols (at the state line, "Staying in NH? Quarantine for 14 days upon arrival"), everything seemed eerily normal. Most noticeably, we passed through Franconia State Park, a popular destination within the White Mountain National Forest, where the highway cuts through the mountains, flanked on either side by recreation sites: ski area, bike path, hiking trailheads,

waterfalls, a huge cliff face often climbed. All the parking lots were roped off, or blocked by cones. Strange to see wilderness closed.

[...]

Sunday, 5/17/20  
Brooklyn, NY

I'm in New York for half a day and a night, to get some things from my apartment, see my roommate and a couple of friends, and ride my bike around the empty streets. I drove down yesterday, stopping once to get gas (gloved and masked), and twice to pee in the woods.

My roommate, Jeff, is being very sensitive about sharing the space. We're wearing masks, except when eating (which we've done, together, since he was unable to resist the urge to share food, to make me feel welcome), and giving each other wide berths in the apartment.

We went for a bike ride around Red Hook, exploring empty parking lots and old piers that have become oases for people looking for outdoor space. One parking lot behind a port warehouse was full of other bikers and skateboarders, and some parked semi trucks and buses. Parks and walking paths were packed with people, cops standing around, chatting with folks, presumably reminding them to maintain distance.

We wore our masks the whole time, and it took some getting used to. I had a couple of moments of claustrophobic panic at the beginning. Like anything, you get used to it.

I met Isabel and her husband, Jose, in Fort Greene park. They gave me their plant to take care of, in anticipation of returning to Colombia when the borders open. We chatted at a distance, one of many small groups scattered around the park. Strange to speak through a mask, not be able to share facial expressions. But so nice to see them. And to be in a place with people, to see how folks are managing to be outside, to talk to each other, to eat take out on the sidewalk in front of the restaurant - it felt oddly like any sunny Sunday in that part of the city (an affluent bubble). The 7 o'clock applause for healthcare workers was a surprise for me, even though I knew it would happen, that it had become a city-wide ritual.

Later, I rode my bike into Manhattan. Over the Williamsburg Bridge, down the long ramp onto Delancy St. that always feels like a landing strip, lights blinking on in the dusk in the flanking apartment buildings. I rode up Avenue A, waved at the theater where I worked last fall, hoping that production wouldn't prove to be the last for me, nor this pandemic the end of theater.

Over one block to 1<sup>st</sup> Ave, and up past the hospitals. Cars pulling up at entrances, people in scrubs coming out or going in, or walking home-ward, checking their phones. Not as many sirens as I expected, based on the things I've read about the constant, anxious drone. Everything oddly calm, almost serene in the twilight. And empty. No traffic. I hardly stopped at lights, even the red ones. Over again, on 42<sup>nd</sup> St., remembering previous rides in Midtown, on my way to or from a theater, unable to keep a steady pace even in the bike lanes because of all the pedestrians overflowing from the sidewalk and the taxis and cars pulling over to let out passengers.

Up 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue to Central Park, then into the park, also empty, despite the warm evening. Reflecting on the brilliance of Olmstead's design, the rolling hills, the paths criss-crossing, winding, looping, intersecting. The bedrock jutting out, where in the fall I bouldered, unsuccessfully attempting a classic route up Rat Rock. West again, crossing the park on a path without dismounting from my bike, as instructed by signage. I passed two people, deep in conversation.

Then a turn south. Out of the park to Broadway. The park's foliage had muffled the city noise, but when I got to Columbus circle the quiet persisted. One or two cars passed. Another cyclist. I could see a few people on the sidewalks, lone walkers.

Down Broadway to the northern tip of Times Square - a place I usually avoid at all costs. Maybe a dozen people milling about, taking pictures of the emptiness, like me. Cops on horses, surveying. Only the blinding screens and signs above reminding of the busyness. Theaters shuttered, 8.5x11 printed signs on lobby doors, last-minute-made.

Over to 9<sup>th</sup> Ave, and down past the bus station. Some folks, mostly homeless, I think, gathering on corners. Some restaurants open for take-out only. I considered stopping for a slice at Two Bros, but the line was long, and the place looked dirty

in a way I'm not used to caring about. And what would my roommate say? So I didn't, even though I was starving by then.

When the pavement got bad on 9<sup>th</sup>, and then on 7<sup>th</sup> Ave, I crossed over to 5<sup>th</sup>, and rode down through Madison Square, usually a mess of various kinds of traffic, but now a breeze. Then down past The New School, gazing up at the corner windows of the building on 16<sup>th</sup> St. where, not so long ago, I met with friends and colleagues and faculty for classes, department events, late-night study sessions. That room that was always too cold, but had a view of the sunset, where you could hear a saxophone player in the afternoons, somewhere below.

Then down around Washington Square Park, where what looked like college students laughed loudly, and some homeless folks with big bags gathered around benches. Through Greenwich Village for a few blocks, not many restaurants open here, but more people on the streets. Then over to Broadway, down through SoHo to Canal Street. Momentary disorientation in the dark. Then cutting through the off-ramps to the bike path, so familiar, to cross the Manhattan Bridge. Then I was on the same route I took every day, to and from school or work or the library or a theater. And I zoned out, as I often did, letting my mind wander, buffered by the pools of lamplight and the guardrails as I traversed the East River. The Empire State Building pulsed red like a heart-beat, *dah-dum, dah-dum*.

The contrast between rural and Manhattan was stark. It's not like the streets of Greensboro, Vermont are normally packed with people. In Manhattan in the evening, the absence of people on the streets was palpable. But so was the feeling of people packed into houses and apartments, a presence of adjustment, waiting, watching, making do.

Friday, 5/22/20  
Greensboro, VT

It's my 30<sup>th</sup> birthday—one I've been looking forward to. Josh arranged a series of Zoom calls with groups of friends and family every evening this week. They were meant to be a surprise, and the first one was, but then a participant quickly gave the whole scheme away. I've had fun with it, and

felt oh so loved, but it's also exhausting. After two months of mostly only seeing Josh and Topper, the social time of travel plus the new roommates (from New York) plus the nightly social hours leave me simultaneously invigorated and drained. My concentration is limited. There's always some task to complete, and it's never reading or writing or applying for jobs. Maybe next week.

But the weather has been beautiful and we've been riding bikes most days. Today, Josh and I went on a long, hilly ride to visit the maple syruping friends from a social distance. Two of the three houses we visited were empty, but at the farthest point of the ride, two friends set out a table with snacks and cold water, and chatted with us from their porch.

I'm feeling the quarantine fatigue, combined with the lust for summer busy-ness. Our little house with a big yard has become a comfortable haven, and I haven't tired of it. Venturing out feels both scary and exciting, and returns are bittersweet. Northern Vermont feels as far-flung as ever, and I dream of driving out - west or northeast (would they let us into Canada?).

[...]

Saturday, 5/30/20  
Greensboro, VT

2020 takes another turn. Protests in Minneapolis, Brooklyn, Atlanta, Louisville...Social media threads and posts with graphics of their faces, promises to say their names - George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, Ahmaud Arbery—promises to do more and be better and here are the actions you can take. Social media is not enough, protests are not enough. I spent yesterday evening glued to my phone, watching videos of protesters and police, people young, old, Black, white, Latinx, Menonite, LGBT - a blur of identities - peace and violence and people pushed to the ground and threatened by Tweets and journalists getting hit by rubber bullets or arrested on live TV, burning precincts, arms linked in solidarity, faces with and without masks because all of this is happening against the backdrop of a pandemic. Apocalyptic images compounded. But just like at so many other moments before and leading up to this one, since the colonization of this

continent, since the first slave ships arrived from Africa, this is only the end of some worlds, only a threat to some lives. I watch a livestream of a police van burning on the edge of Fort Greene Park, near where I was sitting with two friends just a couple of weeks ago, a few blocks from the apartment I'm still paying rent for. I imagine my roommate listening to the shouts and sirens out the kitchen windows. I wonder if he's there, watching the van burn, or joining the protest by Barclay's Center. Would I be, were I not 350 miles north? I wonder what the COVID case count will be in a few weeks. I wonder if it will matter anymore. The spectacle of violence in the streets outweighs the hidden chaos of deaths in overburdened hospitals. I long to write a phone number on my arm in Sharpie and take to the streets. Instead, I scroll through Twitter and click donation links, one after another, late into the night.

[...]

Sunday, 6/7/20

[...]

I've lost track of what and where is "open." The logic eludes me. What does it mean when the streets at the epicenter of the pandemic are crowded with angry, change-making bodies but I resist hugging an old friend in her backyard? What is "open" when windows are smashed and Black folks can't breathe and history seems to be repeating itself and we all pray that it is because we need change but also that it isn't because in 1968 Conservatives won the White House?

Vermont is lifting its mandatory 14-day quarantine for visitors who are coming from a county in New York or New England that has a similar COVID rate as Vermont. There's a map on the health department's website: who is assumed to be contaminated, and who is not.

[...]

Monday, 6/14/20

This morning, when I went to pick up Meals on Wheels food for delivery, I saw a woman sitting in a lawn chair outside a window at the nurs-



ing home. She's been there most weeks, I realized. Probably visiting a resident, talking on their phones, and looking at each other through the window.

I had an encounter that seems like it will bother me for a long time. My second-to-last delivery was to a woman who I haven't seen in a few weeks. She's normally reticent, says hi, thank you, see you next week, and that's it. Today, she came right out, eager to chat about her new horse. On her cement patio, clearly written in a child's handwriting, inside a chalk heart, were the words "white lives matter." I stepped on the drawing as I approached her door. I didn't know what to say about it. So we talked about her horse until she noticed the chalk. "Oh, look what my granddaughter drew," she said. A million potential responses raced through my mind, and my position as educated, complicit, relatively well-off, having to come to her house every week to deliver this social service that she relied on...all of this ended with, "uh huh." What does she think that means to her granddaughter? How old is her granddaughter? Who gave her granddaughter that idea? Does she know what implications those words have, especially right now? Has she been watching the news? What's her news source? Why didn't she notice the drawing sooner? Or did she, and now she's covering it up, playing it off like she didn't know, because she *does* know. She knows what those words imply, knows that they shouldn't be displayed like that, knows that I probably don't agree with that white supremacist statement.

Thursday, 6/18/20

[...]

I stopped at the grocery store on the way home. Fewer people were wearing masks, and the summer vibes were obvious and accompanied by the laissez-faire dismissal of COVID rules. I wore my mask, and sanitized my grocery cart, tried not to touch any items besides the ones I purchased. Still there were empty grocery shelves, still no flour, not much meat.

Friday, 6/19/20

Juneteenth!

This morning I joined a webinar on land reparations. A group of white folks who identify as "reparations accomplices" told us about the Black Land Project, and the idea of returning land to Black communities and Black land stewardship.

I went with a friend, Sayre, to a vigil in Essex Junction. During rush hour, we stood with maybe 150 other people at a busy intersection known as the 5 Corners. We held signs ("Black Lives Matter," "Defund the Police," "Equity Now," "Racism is a Virus") standing 6 feet apart (roughly). Right before 6 pm, we read aloud names of African Americans killed by police, then stood in silence for 8:46 in memory of George Floyd, in solidarity with the Movement for Black Lives. Then the vigil disbanded.

It was the first event I'd been to, and I was glad to have gone, performative as it might have been, to see what's happening in the streets of Vermont (one of the whitest states in the nation). But other activities, like the land reparations webinar, and reading about anti-racism, have felt more productive, ultimately.

On the way home, we stopped at an outdoor restaurant along the road. Crazy to eat restaurant food and listen to live music. We talked about misogyny in Vermont, in our lives in general, and about the discomfort and necessity of having difficult conversations about race.

[...]

Wednesday, 6/24/20

Tamworth, NH

I'm at my parents' house in NH. Josh and Topper too. We came here yesterday, in two cars, to visit my parents and help care for my nieces, who are staying for the week. They have so much energy, but have learned to play together better since COVID made them each others' only playmates. Disagreements about what and how to play that used to dissolve into screams and tears almost immediately now stand a chance of being worked out quietly between the two of them, no adult intervention required.

Tamworth in the summer is usually bustling with seasonal residents, tourists, and locals shopping or snacking at one of the two stores in town, visiting the library, attending summer stock shows at the theater. But Main Street is largely empty. My mom has been working more at the library, facilitating curbside pickups. The head librarian is in the hospital this week (not with COVID, a detail that always needs to be noted these days), so my mom is working more. She's fairly relaxed about COVID. She was a nurse practitioner in her previous career, and has a degree in public health, and she sees our main COVID-related problem as human behavior. It's really hard to change human behavior, and even her fellow librarians get fed up wearing masks at work. Despite her incredibly persuasive (in my vast experience) way of presenting facts and evidence, of encouraging people to just do it, even though it's uncomfortable, plan to take breaks when you're alone or outside, away from others...even she doesn't have her usual sway.

[...]

Sunday, 6/28/20  
Brooklyn, NY

Back in Brooklyn, to move out of my apartment, and say some goodbyes, or goodbye-for-nows.

Yesterday, I hung out with my current roommate, Jeff, and our former roommate, and their partners. Fort Greene Park was the hub of our activities and many others'. Jeff isn't being as strict about wearing masks in the apartment. It's too hot, too stuffy, doesn't provide any relief.

This morning, again, I sat in the park with friends from NSSR. We opted to go maskless, though keep our feet of distance. We chatted leisurely about life, the anthropology department, summer plans, fall plans, travel bans. Hours passed in a summery haze. Later, I rode into Manhattan with Jeff to see if we could join a rally in Washington Square Park. A flat tire on my bike caused us to arrive just as it started to dump rain. We took shelter in NYU Bobst library's entryway with other folks, many of whom wore T-shirts, ribbons, or carried signs supporting Black lives, Black Trans lives, or bedecked with rainbows. Today marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Pride March

in NYC, a tradition started by Black Trans activists in the wake of Stonewall. The Pride parade (a heavily corporate sponsored event these days) was cancelled this year due to COVID, but people took to the streets, combining the BLM movement with Pride in the Queer Liberation March. After the rain, hail, and thunder passed, a double rainbow stretched over West 4<sup>th</sup> Street.

I walked my unrideable bike around some more, alone. Visited Stonewall, where the street outside had become a block party. Almost no one in a mask, all ages, races, genders, dancing, drinking, snapping selfies. "Say My Name" by Destiny's Child came on the loudspeaker, and the DJ paused at every line of the chorus and called "Say her name" or "Say his name" and the crowd responded with "Breonna Taylor," "George Floyd," "Tony McDade," and more.

I walked to City Hall, where the Occupy movement has returned (though in a different form) to demand cuts to the NYPD budget, due on June 30<sup>th</sup>. I wandered through the camp, reminded of the years I lived in Boston and attended Occupy protests and rallies. I made some signs to hang on the police barricades, and listened to words about police brutality, Marxism, anti-racism, social contracts, and new donations that had just arrived. In one corner, recently soaked by the rain, was an ad-hoc memorial for the people whose deaths have sparked this movement. I felt some comfort, some ability to process, minutely, the intensity of this historical moment, as I wandered, anonymous, through a crowd of masked strangers freely sharing space, resources, and ideas. This kind of anonymity in a crowd is something I've always loved, and I missed it during the quarantine.

I visited my favorite bike mechanic at his shop. I told him I'd heard about his son. He cried, as I expected, and I teared up too, tried to stay with him in the moment, remembering that feeling after a profound loss, when tears are always near the surface, consistently uncontrollable, day after day.

Tuesday, 6/30/20  
Brooklyn, NY

My last corona diary entry.

It's fitting. Tonight will be my last night in my apartment in Fort Greene, Brooklyn. Though my lease isn't up until the end of July, I'm hoping they

find someone to move in early, and it's harder just to swing down and move out on a whim with the necessary quarantine on one end or another. Now, NYC is asking people coming into the city from hot spots to quarantine, since things here are under control.

I'm in the midst of packing. Over two years of grad school the most notable accumulation is books. Otherwise, I don't have much more than what I moved down with: clothes, a small table, a chair, some knickknacks, a lamp. And my bike. How I love riding the city on my bike. Especially in the summer, especially on a warm night when the lights are soft-bright spots and shadows, blurry and distant and the air is thick with summer stickiness and salt water scent and your moving body melts into it, gliding over the bumpy streets, catching glimpses through backlit windows, late-night dog-walkers, snips of music on the sidewalk or stoplight...Even now, wearing a mask, it's still freeing.

New York feels different than it did three months ago. Partly it's the summer weather: people are out and about, sitting in the parks, meeting for socially distant walks and gatherings. Outdoor dining tables have extended into parking spaces. Ad-hoc tables and serving windows in storefronts with tarps strung up overhead (like the taco place two blocks over). There's less car traffic, more bike and foot traffic, less movement in general. And of course, the protests. People are taking back the streets. And it feels wonderful.

I just emptied my food cabinet in the small shared kitchen. Cans of beans, pasta, cartons of soup—all purchased in the days and weeks before the shut-down, when fears of being stuck inside my apartment inspired my grocery shopping habits. I sat here, where I'm sitting now, and wrote furiously in a paper journal. Feeling, in waves of curiosity and dread, the intensity of the moment. The need to witness, to document, to write. (I later copied that first diary entry in the time of COVID-19 into the digital diary I've been keeping since.)

Three and a half months. Hard to believe. I'm sad to be leaving this little room at the top of a house with an orange door. I'll miss the sky lights, the feeling of being either in a tower or a cave, depending on the time of day. I might even miss the low, sloping ceiling and crooked stairs. I'll miss

the sunlight streaming in through the kitchen windows in the morning, when I'm the only one awake early enough to enjoy it. I'll miss watching the street out those windows, the neighbors' art projects, the domino games, the Uber drivers who pull up out front, where a fire hydrant provides a space to stop and check a phone, eat a sandwich, change a shirt. I'll miss late-night conversations with my roommate, talking about whatever - theater, literature, politics. I won't miss his unwillingness to get rid of things, even if he can't remember where they came from or what he used them for. Now, more than ever, he's spread his stuff out in the common spaces. As he should—he's been living alone for months now, since our other roommate started house-sitting for a wealthy couple in Cobble Hill. I'm grateful that I was able to go to Vermont, to give him space, myself space, as our physical worlds contracted.

At the same time, I missed witnessing New York in one of its defining moments, as the epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic. It will surely become a historical marker, one of those things New Yorkers check each other with: "Did you stay through the quarantine?" And then they might ask about the curfew, too, the week of protests, looting, the drone of helicopters ("This is the sound of the police losing," one friend had to remind herself, growing angry) that replaced the drone of sirens. Now the audio landscape includes fireworks every night, and conspiracy theories abound. Some kids near the park the other night were shooting Roman candles into the air from a street corner. I stopped to watch. Delighted by their delight. Able to enjoy the revelry, at least for a moment, because I can sleep through it, unlike many people. (Last night I had dinner with my cousin, who works for the public advocate's office, and he said, "I just don't understand the fireworks. I mean, you can't do that. It's not allowed. It's just not *allowed*! You can't do that!")

Monday, I did some work in the morning, saw a friend in the afternoon, and biked into the city to visit the Occupy camp at City Hall (more police than the day before), and then meet my cousin for dinner. Outside dining on a street in SoHo — a luxury even in ordinary times—felt otherworldly.

Today, I met Isabel and Jose for breakfast in Prospect Park. We brought our own food (though I did try one of Jose's chocolate pancakes with

homemade blueberry jam), and sat far enough apart that we could take our masks off. It was much more relaxed than our last meeting. Still no hugs, but we could talk more freely. They're happier since moving to a different apartment. Still waiting for Colombia to open its borders or for passage on a humanitarian flight in August. The New School will be completely online in the fall, so they hope to be in Colombia for the whole semester. If all goes according to plan, I probably

won't see them again until 2021. We spent a few hours in the park, talking about their life since they moved, their plans for the fall, Isabel's new job, my job search, New York and how we love it, academia and how we hate it. The thrill of sitting with friends, in person, in public, just talking, is sharp and sweet. Our parting was hasty, because it started to rain.

. . .

## **“This diary is turning into a personal morbidity and mortality report.”**

LEE BRANDO

*I am a second year PhD student in anthropology at the New School for Social Research in New York City. My research interest is in pain and telehealth, situated in the Northwestern United States region. Ironically, my fieldwork for this summer was supposed to be in Seattle (the first U.S. epicenter for COVID-19). I have also worked as a public high school history teacher for the past 12 years. And, since mid-March I have been teaching remotely. I live in downtown Brooklyn, within a seven building cooperative complex, which is a community amidst the bustle of urban life comprising the seat of municipal government, the main borough post office, many courthouses, a couple of college campuses, a multitude of small businesses, and greenspace within Cadman Plaza and Brooklyn Bridge Parks. I share a 68 square meter apartment with my wife (Tara), dog (Lucy), and three cats (Biscuits, Cole, and “Baby Cat”). My building complex is poised between the Brooklyn and Manhattan Bridges, which is usually percolating with throngs of tourists and transit between the boroughs; however, it has recently become deafeningly quiet except for the intermittent, piercing sound of sirens.*

[...]

Friday 3.20.2020

In the six years that I've lived in my apartment, I have had relatively minimal interactions with my direct neighbors across the hall. We attended a rooftop party together once and occasionally commiserated about the miserable state of politics while taking the elevator. However, I often forgot their names and had to reach deep into the recesses of my mind to summon them upon seeing them in passing. But last night, after Tara and I returned from walking the dog -- one of the few times we escaped the confines of our one-bedroom apartment -- our neighbor rang our bell shortly after our return. We had just seen her in the hallway and exchanged greetings. She asked if she could come in because her husband had locked her out. Tara and I hesitantly agreed. My hesitance was because this seemed to violate social distancing measures and Diane appears to be in a vulnerable group, likely being above 60 years old and having underlying conditions (another neighbor told me she has cancer). Diane walks and talks very slowly, she is always wearing layers of clothing even when it is warm, and her incontinence is sometimes evident from the smell in the hallway. Admittedly, part of my reluctance to invite her in was because Tara and I were about to eat dinner and

I also felt socially awkward over this irregular situation before us. In spite of that, Diane came in and sat down and we had a strained conversation for about an hour before Tara suggested that she call her husband. She borrowed Tara's phone and upon her using it I thought that we must swab that with alcohol when she leaves. Harry, her husband did not answer so she left a message and said that Harry was probably sleeping. After another few minutes passed, we asked Diane if she cared to join us for dinner. She declined because she said she had IBS and said she found that skipping one meal a day helps that condition. At that point, Tara went toward the kitchen to cook and when out of Diane's view signaled rather vigorously to me that I should knock on their door. I went into the kitchen to mime a conversation with Tara to check if that was a good idea given that Diane did not want me to knock on the door. Tara confirmed that she wished for me to do so, so I did. Harry answered the door and I told him Diane was with us. We exchanged some awkward conversation about the effectiveness of bleach versus alcohol for killing germs and there was an understanding that Diane would return home. When I came back into my apartment Diane was looking at pictures in our hallway and commenting that she liked seeing other people's apartments. She seemed reluctant to leave and both Tara and I were impatiently waiting for her departure. After she left, we both



exchanged expressions of *wasn't that crazy* to one another. However, it was not two minutes before our doorbell rang again. I answered it and Diane was there returning the half bottle of rubbing alcohol I gave her since she said she didn't have any. Both the bottle and her hands smelled of bleach, which made me wonder if Harry had forced her to put bleach on her hands. I accepted the returned alcohol, wondering why they couldn't just keep it. Tara and I had our dinner, incredulous about last night's occurrence, and debating which one of us will now need to return the sunglasses and paper Diane left behind. It looks like it's going to be me.

Saturday 3.21.2020

We had a repeat of Thursday evening last night. When I returned from walking Lucy at 11:00 pm, Diane was standing in front of her door. I asked her if Harry locked her out again and she confirmed that. I asked her if she wanted me to call the police, knock on her door, or if she wished to come into our apartment. She responded in the negative to all three. She explained that Harry wished for her to get into a cab and go to her brother's house on Long Island. Harry found her brother's number and gave it to her. Diane then came into our apartment and used Tara's phone again to call her brother. It seemed odd to me that from the side of the conversation I heard appeared to lack some question on the part of Diane's brother about the oddity of this scenario. However, I just proceeded to knock on my neighbor's door. Harry looked out of the peephole and then opened his door. I explained that Diane was in our apartment again. He sheepishly told me that she "violated the quarantine." I asked if he was sick and he replied that he wasn't. So I told him that we are not under quarantine and we may go out permitted that we remain six feet away from others. He said that he is imposing a quarantine. At this point, I thought he was paranoid and cruel and I told him that Diane called her brother. We would call a car service to take her to her brother's but she needed her phone, her medications, change of clothes, etc. (and that it was 11 pm at night... and in my tone conveyed *for christ sake you don't fucking lock your seriously ill wife out of the house and have her take a cab without a phone to Long Island*). Harry gathered up some items. He gave me a phone

without a sim card and said he could not find her phone. Tara called car service and we put her in a cab. Our doorman told us after the car service pulled away from the curb that this incident was not an aberration. Harry often has Diane waiting for him in the lobby when he is out seeing his girlfriend. One time she had soiled her incontinence brief and was sitting in the lobby waiting for him to return. Therefore, when Tara and I returned to our apartment I called the 84th precinct and left a message with the domestic violence unit.

[...]

Monday 3.30.2020

It's 8:30 am and my lazy cats have just ambled over to eat the food I put down for them. My dog and Tara are still sleeping. I love the quiet of the morning and the quiet is even quieter now and the mornings are even longer. I have hours to myself to address items on my list before having to negotiate my time. This is a novelty to me—or rather something I haven't had in a while. The schedule for when I eat, urinate, and sleep on weekdays is usually tightly structured and choreographed to maximize my efficiency, energy, and motivation. I feel guilty for enjoying the relative freedom while being isolated inside under rules of social distance and I wonder if this feeling will continue. Admittedly, this weekend's continual rainy weather did wear on my spirits and I did experience boredom last evening for the first time. But the quietude of this morning to think, read, reflect without dealing with a typical day filled with throngs of students and faculty has been pleasant.

*Postscript to last week's APS note:* I made contact with APS and provided Diane's information for her to hopefully get a home health aide. I have not seen or heard Diane or Harry but that has been my usual experience over the last 6+ years.

At 9:30 am APS called me again to say that Diane was not picking up her phone. I offered to knock on her door, but the caller suggested she would try in an hour.

4:11 pm

There are a couple of significant things I have left out likely due to self censoring from an embodied vestige of my Catholic upbringing. The first is more of a confession (another latent holdover). I have been watching an incredible amount of television in the evenings. I am concerned that my brain may rot as a result of this pandemic. The other is that I have been very concerned about my dad. I have called him at least once daily. He is immunocompromised both because of his age and because he is currently undergoing treatment for non hodgkin's lymphoma. I am trying to just text him today because I think that my surveillance of him is annoying him (and it's a bit onerous for me as well). Like many in his age group, it takes him on average two to three hours to respond to text messages. He has not completely embraced digital communication.

[...]

Monday 4.6.2020

Last night I had a dream that was both comforting and disturbing at the same time. It comprised two key figures from my research and work life. The setting was Seattle and the director of the site where I was given access was allowing me to go ahead to continue. However, his lax attitude about covid transmission made me anxious. He was not wearing a mask. I questioned whether transmission was still a threat. The scene moved to include my boss where I was moving within a space deemed contaminated. I had to be there for some reason. My supervisor entered the area and then there was a whirl of odd scenarios. One that I could tease out and remember is that she sent me on some errand to get items from the drying machine (this may be a holdover from my doing laundry yesterday or something related to the hygienic ritual practices of washing). I imagine that the dream represented my fatigue over the rituals of disinfecting and mask wearing. I went to bed last night worried that I did not wash my hands long enough when returning from walking the dog. And, this morning I woke to the news that a tiger has contracted covid.

I honestly despise wearing a face mask outside and whenever I am far away enough from people I move it to around my neck. It is difficult to breathe with a mask on my face. There is no feeling of fresh air and my vision is also occluded. So the walks outside on a lovely sunny day are now dampened by protective gear...I understand why, the sirens outside my window remind me. They are symbols of the morbidity and mortality statistics that we read daily on a local, national, and global level.

[...]

Tuesday 4.21.2020

As I read about conditions improving, slightly fewer COVID-related deaths and hospital admissions in New York City, I am hearing about cases within my wider social network. The cases are from outside of the center of New York City, which is consistent with what is being reported regarding the suburbs cresting after the city. This disparity is corroborated by my anecdotal conversations with health care workers that I know. My mother-in-law's nursing home in Queens (the borough in NYC hardest hit by COVID, where she is the director of nursing) has seen fewer patients going to the hospital and dying this week. However, my cousin, a nurse working in a small Nassau County hospital, is seeing the same steady stream of five COVID admissions a day. And, she indicated there are still PPE shortages; they are not receiving N95 masks (but another type of hospital grade mask).

My close friend told me on Saturday evening, when we spoke, that her uncle had died from COVID. He lived on Long Island, possibly Suffolk County. Last night, after teaching my seminar, I received a text from my mom indicating that my brother-in-law's colleague (whom he is in close contact with) tested positive. He is an essential worker, working for Metro North. My patience was a bit short -- unsure if that was because it was a long day or I am burnt out from constantly fielding problems in my sister's life... but my texts were a bit clipped: practical and less emotional. My advice was that he needs to self-quarantine. He suggested living in his basement, away from his family for two weeks, is the course of action that is recommended. I'm sure that my sister is displeased with that since

she will now have to wrangle her four children alone. I do not envy people with small children; I imagine this isolation is much more stressful having to manage their psychological, emotional, and physical needs on top of one's own.

Thursday 4.23.2020

My very dear friend has been vomiting all morning and has muscle aches and pain in the area of her left kidney. I was called by a mutual friend and asked to check in on her but not indicate that I heard that from her. I was told to wait before calling because my friend was apparently vomiting now. So as I waited, passing the time by grading, I received a phone call from Leslie. She called to thank me for a card I sent and I used the opportunity of her sounding terrible to ask what was wrong. She shared her symptoms and I advised her to call her doctor. I was surprised that it wasn't difficult to persuade her; she's typically quite stubborn. She must be scared—living alone. I would be also. I will hear from her again after her telehealth visit with her doctor...

Our mutual friend, Jen, is a social worker in a Brooklyn hospital. She said that more people are being discharged but the ICU cases do not recover. That corroborates reporting on immunity (as uncertain as that is) playing a significant role in the disease's trajectory. I inquired about her accounts of Remdesivir and she said that it is looking less promising than previously thought.

[...]

Thursday 4.30.2020

This diary is turning into a personal morbidity and mortality report. I write as Tara is still sleeping. When she awakes we are going over to our friend's. Yesterday we received a call indicating that Leslie was vomiting uncontrollably again. Her neighbor and friend, Patricia, is currently riding this out in the South with her family. She contacted Tara because Tara and Natalie (our resident cat rescue cooperators) are using Patricia's empty apartment for a foster cat that was found on the property. Tara took "Quinn" to the vet and she seems to be recovering from a host of health issues nicely and will be adopted.

When we went to Leslie's yesterday, she looked white as a sheet. She was on the couch and despite our pleas, she refused to go to urgent care. I was in touch with her siblings and her brother, a retired nurse, made some suggestions. I went to the pharmacy to gather up some OTC remedies and pushed some pedialyte on her to replenish her electrolytes, which she vomited up before we left. Tara and I are resolved this morning to call 911 if she does not agree to allow us to accompany her to urgent care. I informed her sister via text last night and she agreed with this course of action.

I am trying to temper my anger and frustration with her, but the truth is that I am scared. Leslie is so fucking difficult, especially when it comes to her health care. She typically ignores problems, has a shitty GP, and does not comply with his treatment plans. I had to fight with her to enter her apartment yesterday.

5:21 pm

After spending several hours at Leslie's, we are back home feeling much better that our friend is not currently dying. She drank fluids and even ate a half sandwich while we were there. And, it was actually pleasant to be working in another location other than my apartment (well, if I am going to violate a social distancing measure, I may as well enjoy it).

[...]

Tuesday 5.12.2020

I lost the habit of identifying the day of week for several entries above. It is probably an indication of the monotony of life at the moment. I'm taking a break from grading hell right now, if only to maintain a small hold on my sanity. This may seem like an embellishment, but the boredom of repeating the same comments while seriously engaging in work is an exhausting business. One that I cannot say I am always fully committed to doing. Usually, I can commiserate with colleagues about students (which I have mixed feelings about—it is both an outlet but also a distraction). To some extent, Tara has served as a nice collaborator, in that regard, during these moments of social isolation. She gets her share of subpar work from stu-

dents and annoying questions... However, she is busy right now and I need to scream after reading each essay or two. This entry will need to serve as my scream!

[...]

. . .

## **“I go into my room, firmly closing the door behind me. I’m with me again.”**

VOLKAN EKE

*VE, who often animates other people more than he does himself, is a Doctoral Candidate in New York whose existence has had to come to terms with its biggest fear due to COVID-19. Whenever he suffered uncertainty in terms of his doctoral project, which represents more or less ⅔ of his life, Volkan had found respite in possessing the single focus of being able to go back home. As an international student, Volkan has always treated life in New York as a passing thing. He’d always manage to get back home if things got rough. Over the course of the COVID-19 times, he had to grapple with the ensuing fear that New York, and not the virus, had actually proven to be his biggest villain and inescapable fate. Could he find a way to escape once again, as he has done so many times before? Or has his good faith in escapism, cultivated through years of virtuous practice and hard-earned experience, finally turned out to be misplaced? I suppose I do not have to tell you how frightening it can be for an anthropologist to be unable to go back home.*

[...]

The sound of a page turning

[Date: The big week of NYC shutdowns]

Pretty soon, I look down on the world from the same hill.

“*I moved*”, I say to my friend and colleague who had merely tuned in for a check-in. It’s been a while since we’ve last seen each other as my default mode of being is already socially distant in the first place. I’ve been quite worried about the increasingly unsanitary conditions of my Airbnb and showings-riddled old place. My partner been growing quite worried too, I add. We had been monitoring the pandemic since the early days of its onset in Wuhan after all. My friend is freaked out to find out that I moved to a new place, but her message ends on a tone that is not on the same page as mine: “*thankfully all these measures they’re taking will put our minds at ease*”. There have been talks about taking measures at the department too. In a show of uncharacteristic preparedness, it doesn’t take long for the school to announce taking everything online and closing down campus. This effectively takes all classes online, but not just classes, but my PhD exams too. A contested notion as it was met with resistance when it was first brought up in the past in committee communications.

As it takes little for me to turn the page officially to social distancing, some of my colleagues, if not advisors, remain on the previous pages. In a few days, we hear that both my colleague and advisor got the virus.

I hope to catch wind of the sound of a page turning. *I told them so, didn’t I?*

Nevertheless, I also find myself wishing there could be a way for me to be there for them. I’d like to think of this as my better side winning out. Because it’s for their own good too.

For I am good at helping, when I know I was right.

My Name is Sam

[A day after I had stopped checking the calendar]

The vast hangar looks like the inside of a high tech warehouse. The garage lift is empty as my bike is nowhere to be found. I will have to make the trek on foot. But the terminal is very smart so I don’t have to interact with anyone in the shelter. The conveyor belts come to life and soon I’m handed two metal suitcases to take to another shelter in the area. I take my cargo, give it a moment’s thought about whether to attach it to my suit or to put it on my back rack. Decisions like this matter. I check my maps and anticipate lots of hard terrain and difficult footing. I don’t trust my back

pains but I trust people even less so I scurry away regardless.

It is a beautiful world with bright sunlight. From here on to the snowy mountains out in the distance there is nothing but the calm of unused craggy landscape. Wonder what it was like before there were cities full of people. Not as beautiful I wager. If I'm lucky, I won't encounter any crazies along the way. The people might be wiped out but their leftovers are not friendly. Or perhaps too friendly. I like my cargo run when it's just me. With the sound of one foot in front of the other, I hold on to the bag straps on my shoulders tightly. The next shelter shouldn't be far now. I imagine the terminal will be as easy to use as the last one so I don't have to interact with anyone. I press the buttons tightly. It makes sure Sam walks his way just fine.

#### My Name is No Longer Sam [Same day]

I hate this. I hate that I have to move my stuff. No, I hate that I've gotten so much better at it that I don't even notice anymore. I wish there was a way to do this without asking for help. It is hard to move cargo around and I don't trust my neck pains but I trust people even less so I scurry away regardless.

I strap on my armor. It consists of a hoodie with my shirt safely tucked in my trousers. The hoodie is a cosplay item. I trust it. I might need my shirt when I get back so it's well protected. Got my trousers in my home country though. Travel limitations now prevent me from going back there. I would hate to see my trousers from home wasted on a trek in these alien lands. The school bag strapped on my back is kept empty for the cargo I can hopefully save when I make it to my destination. The cart I drag along is also empty but reserved for contaminated cargo. I take a deep breath, fend off my new roommates' offers of help. Adjust my mask, pull up my rubber gloves and open the door outside. It is a dimly lit world with lots of dust and grime in the corridors. With any luck, I won't encounter the crazies at my old place. The airbnbs or visitors might be gone but the apartment they left behind is as good as contaminated already.

The trek is treacherous but I stand at the entrance of my old apartment anyway. I lean to the

door and listen carefully. No movements inside. Ok this is my chance. Regrettably there is no way to open this door quietly and just like that, the whole building knows I'm here and up to something. I don't want to be seen wearing a mask and having to explain. I dash in quickly with my bag and cart trailing behind. Checking doors and corners so as not to run into my old roommates or any other unfriendlies. When I play as Sam, there is this thing I do where I press the buttons tightly. It makes sure that Sam walks his way just fine. I must still be pressing the buttons because even in the rush of things, I haven't bumped into any of the corners. I go into my room, firmly closing the door behind me. I'm with me again.

My old room looks abandoned. With things lying around like they suddenly fell from the ceiling one day. This is the end of the road for one of the gloves. With practiced speed, I clean with the gloved hand and cycle the essentials into my bags with the other. I suspect some of my stuff must have been exposed, but I cannot part with all of them, so they go right into the cart. They will have to be sorted out later. With the cart and the bags, it is simply too much to carry for one person. I press the buttons tightly. Lean on the door and listen to the apartment, still contaminated, if not more so. There is only so much speed one can muster when going out of the room with the weight of an arbitrarily selected plethora of one's own things. With the corner of my eye I see shadows sliding under my roommate's door. Is this finally the time he is coming out of his shelter? I coordinate between carrying cargo, dragging the cart around and sneaking out. When you sneak, the key is to act like now is not the time for the worst to happen. I sense movement in the Airbnb end of the corridor. I thought they had left already. The apartment door mirrors my impatience as it shuts close before I can fully drag everything out. I press on and make it out in a close call.

I stand there for a moment. I'm with me again. But I still keep pressing the buttons.

[...]



### On Vincent and indulgence

[Date: Towards the end of lockdown, when we could exempt ourselves to an indulgence or two every now and then]

Today, the ants have decided that my name is Vincent.

Vincent is a lot harder to be than Sam. In this one game, Vincent is riddled with so much guilt he wakes up to a nightmare tower that he needs to climb every night lest he risks falling dead in his sleep. That is how the curse goes, for one who has indulged in a bad fantasy. Although, the true difficulty is not the horror, nor the emotional weight that comes from playing a character who suffers from self-deprecation and guilt, for I am all too familiar with those.

But from the fact that Vincent chooses, or as playing Vincent I chose, to help uplift others I meet at the tower.

In any case, when Vincent wakes up, he finds his 3x5 room overrun by ants.

I hadn't played this game in a long while. Why am I Vincent today, of all the days, then? Because today, I woke up to a room full of ants.

My parents have always taught me to keep my room tidy. No food anywhere in the room, let alone the vicinity of the bed. But once, only for once, given the pedestrian extraordinariness of COVID, I thought I could indulge myself. And left an open milkshake on the bedside desk overnight.

This is what you get for not doing the right thing for once. For being someone other than what you imagine yourself to be, someone who doesn't care about his lessons, if only for once.

I now spend the day wondering two things: 1. was I in a nightmare tower in my sleep? Does this mean I'm also cursed - for perhaps indulging in the bad habit of neglecting my code of cleanliness for once? 2. how do I get rid of a whole colony of ants without spreading them, and thereby the curse too, to others?

This is going to be a long day.

. . .

## **“Time will come to a stop.”**

NICOLAS LANGLITZ

*I'm professor of anthropology at The New School in New York. As the COVID crisis hits and administrative meetings multiply, I have the bad luck of chairing the department. I started this diary when the university had just closed its campus and all meetings were moved to Zoom. This semester I'm not teaching though. Two years ago, my family moved from Brooklyn to Maplewood, NJ. Maplewood is a village or suburb in the Greater New York Area. A direct train connects us with Penn Station. Most people here work in Manhattan. They tend to be middle- to upper middle-class white collar workers who now get to work from their home offices (although one of our friends plays a role in the Broadway musical Harry Potter, which was an extremely well paying job, but now she is without income). When I don't have to go to my office, I usually work in the Millburn Public Library. But that has just closed as well. So I'm working from our house, which I share with my wife Donya and our two small children, Kiki (5 years old) and Loretta (2 years). All daycares have closed and they can't go on playdates with their friends anymore, which is not exactly conducive to work, but I do get to spend more time with the children—which I enjoy.*

Finally Nothing Happens  
15 March 2020

The New School has shut down classes and administrative meetings to prevent the spreading of Sars-CoV2. Everything has been moved to Zoom video conferences. On Wednesday, I already had online meetings from 10am to 4pm. Now spring break gives us a moment to breathe.

It's a beautiful spring day. The trees are beginning to blossom. I go running on the soccer field of DeHart Park right behind our house and our 5-year-old daughter Kiki agrees to run with me for the first time (she gets to take short-cuts). My wife Donya rides next to me with our two-year old daughter Loretta on the back seat. Many people are enjoying the spring weather in the park. Everybody keeps their distance, but the atmosphere is relaxed and peaceful. It feels like the time around Thanksgiving or between Christmas and New Year when everything comes to a halt. As I run, I feel energized and free. I'm looking forward to a summer without travel during which I can write a short book on psychedelic mysticism titled \*Permanent Holiday\*.

The situation reminds me of how World War I began. Everybody was excited because, finally, something was about to happen. Today, everybody is excited because, finally, nothing happens. Time

will come to a stop. But we know how long the enthusiasm about the war lasted.

[...]

Anthropological Pessimism  
20 March 2020

The Dutch organizer of a canceled psychedelics conference writes back to me about rescheduling the event. I have never met him in person, but these days otherwise purely logistical exchanges often turn into more personal conversations about how we experience this global pandemic in different parts of the world. This colleague expresses his hope that the crisis will not only kill possibly millions of people and destroy our economies but foster a sense of human interconnectedness. And indeed we're creating and feeling this interconnectedness as we write to each other. I experience it when I leave the house to go jogging on the soccer field before dinner. Every time a short middle-aged black woman in a black parka paces around the field. She is always talking to someone on her cell phone, but every time I pass her we exchange a smile. In the university, one of my colleagues has

come down with a high fever and, although they still don't have the resources to test him, he has to self-quarantine. Immediately, other members of the department offer to go shopping for him and drop off bags of food at his doorstep. Yes, we are all in this together and facing this challenge together nurtures a sense of solidarity.

And yet it's not just because I enjoy playing devil's advocate that I object to the Dutch colleague's expression of hope. From past epidemics we know that they don't alleviate but aggravate social inequalities. Here in the United States, this effect will be especially dramatic as those without secure jobs—and even many with jobs they thought secure—are losing their income and their housing. The rich will take a temporary hit as the plunging stock markets decimate their wealth, but if you have more than enough money even in times like these now is the time to buy—to emerge from the crisis even richer. The New York Times reports that two Republican senators sold off stock affected by the pandemic before the financial crash after they learned about the bleak predictions of experts in closed-door meetings. And yet they didn't warn the public or contradict their President who ignored briefings by his own intelligence services and dismissed the pandemic as a Democratic hoax, yet another attempt to impeach him by wrecking confidence in the strong economy that would fuel his re-election. At press conferences, Trump is sparring with journalists over whether it's racist to call the new corona virus “the Chinese virus” or “Kung-flu.” Meanwhile, European governments can't come up with a unified response but confiscate medical supplies to prevent them from being brought to fellow EU member states who need them just as badly. Italy has largely fended for itself—until the Chinese, as they are beginning to get the original outbreak in their own country under control, come to the rescue, filling the geostrategic void which Trump's America First politics have created.

The sense of interconnectedness which “humanity” experiences in the face of a common enemy might still be giving a warm glow to everyday life in these early days of the pandemic, but in the political sphere it hasn't even lasted for three weeks. As the financial and medical resources to save our lives and livelihoods are growing scarcer by the day, new tears in the social fabric will pull

us apart. As the recession hits, the crime rate has been predicted to rise. It won't take long for man to be a wolf to man again. COVID won't cure me of my anthropological pessimism.

[...]

Fever

23 March 2020

Our 2-year old daughter Loretta develops a fever in the evening. We measure 39.1°C. She oscillates between being in good spirits and feeling miserable, wanting to nurse. We give her a Tylenol suppository, which helps. Her sleep is fitful, but she wakes up cheerful again, still running a temperature though.

Probably nothing serious (even though children have been reported to develop only mild symptoms of COVID-19). What I find troubling is that we have been very serious about social distancing in the past 10 days. Donya went into supermarkets twice but took all the precautions and the children stayed with me. The only time that we took Loretta into a social space was when we went to the consulate three days ago. And we made every effort to contain the children, we cleaned their hands with hand sanitizers several times—and yet some virus seems to have slipped through. Sheer luck that it probably wasn't SARS-CoV-2.

Angry Old Lady

25 March 2020

I take our daughters to Maplecrest Park in Maplewood. As I'm pushing Loretta on her tricycle and making sure that Kiki doesn't cross busy streets on her scooter, I'm trying to talk on Skype to a Cologne friend who self-quarantined because of a soar throat. The girls get angry at me for not paying attention, so I end the conversation.

In the park, we run into an elderly lady who starts yelling at me: “Do you know what all these people are doing in the park together? Why are they here?” I say that it looks as if the group nearest to us was a family playing soccer. “Impossible!” she yells back. “I don't understand why your generation doesn't care that my generation will die of this virus!” I tell her that I very much agree with her about the importance of social dis-

tancing measures. It took me two weeks to get my mother in Germany to understand the severity of the situation. Until a week ago, she still squeezed herself into a car with several friends to go for a walk together. She even considered attending a funeral and a church service for a neighbor whom she had disliked while he was still alive. Many of her friends, including a doctor who lives upstairs, think that the recommended social distancing measures are ridiculous. In other words, the divide isn't simply generational. That doesn't pacify the frightened old lady. My daughters are about to get upset that again I'm not paying attention to them and we have to move on.

[...]

#### Natural Historical Nightmare Friday, 26 March 2020

At 5 a.m., my 5-year old daughter Kiki dashes into our bedroom. "Daddy, I'm scared of the cough," she says crawling under my blanket. It seems as if she had had a nightmare. I can't fall asleep anymore and think of Koselleck's essay about dreams of terror during the Third Reich. History leaves its traces in our dreams and so does the natural history of SARS-CoV2.

[...]

#### 911 Saturday, 4 April 2020

I go for a walk in the morning before the rest of my family wakes up. I talk to my mom on FaceTime. As I get back to DeHart Park I pass by two African American ladies chatting at the bottom of a short grassy slope leading to the baseball field. One is lying on the floor with her left leg straight and her right leg bend, which looks like a position from one of my daily stretches. I'm just surprised that she would be doing this on the grass, which is still a little wet. She is wearing a face mask. Then a third person starts calling, gesturing toward the lady on the floor. Suddenly, I realize that she is injured. I climb down to her and she explains that she ran past a dog that jumped at her and she fell down the slope. She had a back operation five years ago and has limped every

since. She appears very anxious, which I understand all too well. After experiencing the fragility of your back such even small events can be terrifying. I feel ashamed that I initially misinterpreted the situation. I call 911 and soon after the firemen arrive with face masks. They ask the injured lady—Beatrice is her name—if she had any COVID symptoms, which she denies. They pull her up and she refuses to be brought to a hospital. She seems fine, just anxious. She wants to walk home, but the firemen insist that she calls her husband to get picked up.

I meet the lady who found her two more times in the park that day and we always greet each other. The park has become such a social hub now that everybody is largely confined to their homes.

[...]

#### New Life 21 April 2020

I dream of having been accepted to an MA program in Israel. In the wake of COVID, American higher education has collapsed and I have to start a new life. I must have applied indiscriminately because when the acceptance letter arrives I don't know anything about the university. I check online and their research in paleontology looks really interesting to me. I don't know anything about paleontology other than that you get to travel to excavation sites and dig out bones of extinct animal species. But I'm ready to do something entirely different.

Together with my family, I get onto a Deutsche Bahn train to Jerusalem. We realize that DB lost our suitcases. They always mess things up, but I don't mind that our old stuff is gone.

We get off at a small stop in a neighborhood full of students. It's spring and the atmosphere is relaxed and easy going. I realize that I should let my mom know that we've moved to Israel. Even in times of COVID, I'm sure she will mostly worry about the risk of a terror attack. Her risk perceptions tend to be irrational. Life seems so carefree over here.

I call the university admissions officer because I haven't received the paperwork they wanted to send by mail. He asks for my address and wants me to spell my name. I realize that I'm not spell-

ing my own name, but a different one: S-C-H-L-A-N-K (which means slim). “Nicolas Schlank”? I don’t know why I’ve given a false name. If I’m serious about this new life, I shouldn’t give some alias. But maybe I did just that because I really wanted to start an entirely new life?

At least in my dreams, this crisis opens up possibilities and restores a sense of youthful expectancy.

[...]

. . . .

**“The delineation of loneliness resulting from COVID and exaggerated version of isolation that was already part of our modern life is, however, thin.”**

VAIDA NORVILAITE

*I am an anthropology candidate, and my goal to disembark the shores of the tropical Rio de Janeiro this summer for nine-month-long fieldwork has shattered into pieces. Unsettlement is what I am dealing with.*

*Just before the COVID crisis, I returned from my home in Lithuania. I spent a couple of weeks with my mother since her health is on and off. I keep reconsidering the decision to come back to the reddest dot in the Corona map on earth. I also asked my roommate to move out, little did I know back then that confinement was about to start. Overall, I enjoy my sunny and cozy solitary cell in Boerum Hill, Brooklyn. Sometimes it just gets too solitary, not to mention expensive. Looking for a new person just seems too much of a risky idea right now.*

*My boyfriend James just moved to New York and lives in Greenpoint. He is the only person I see and sometimes bike with. On a windy and grey day, only the piece of road populated by the Hasidic community continues its life. It feels like a surreal scene from David Lynch's movie when crossing it.*

March 23<sup>rd</sup>, Monday, 5:41 pm

A friend, who shamed me for planning to go to Nashville (a trip originally planned for this upcoming weekend and canceled due to Corona) reached out to me with a suggestion to flee our apartments and go on a clandestine trip to Austin, Texas. Imagine—30 degrees celsius, a barbeque, and a backyard. I just got rid of my roommate, so leaving a space free of foreign problems, attitudes, dirty coffee mugs, and paying yet another rent does sound too alluring. On the other hand, nothing else really does. Neither the opportunity to finish unfinished projects, nor meditations, nor watching Netflix all day long. In fact, everything sucks. But maybe this week will be the one turning the sentiments of unsettlement into something more settled.

[...]

March 25<sup>th</sup>, Wednesday, 3:32 pm

Today my friend Mike woke me up from the lethargy condition that I have been in and out of for the last 10 days. He introduced me to a mental vaccine of mental toughness consisting of 1gallons of water, 45 minutes of exercising outside, and 45 minutes of exercising inside, 10 pages of reading

(this one is easy!), healthy eating, and no alcohol. And this has to last for 75 consecutive days. Honestly, no alcohol is the only thing that makes me hesitate. Alcohol is so central to survival in these times of depression. Also, can I even go for walks every day in Brooklyn, New York? It seems this city is becoming a hot mess.

[...]

April 2<sup>nd</sup>, Thursday 7:03 am

Been throwing up all night. Out of blue. I did not eat anything suspicious, everyone around is comparatively healthy and managing the way through. And sometimes I wake up, have to sit in my bed for a couple of minutes until I finally realize that this is not some surreal dream and I am by myself here in New York, Brooklyn. Maybe I shouldn't have asked my roommate to leave, even though she kept the most enormous pile of clothes and uncleaned mugs and other dirty dishes in her room to the point that one could not enter it? At least I could wake up to some sort of liveliness and extra money. The last time I was throwing up like this when I was going through some uneasiness at



school. Maybe this is how my body screams for attention to be more gentle with myself.

April 6<sup>th</sup>, Monday 5:30 pm

I had a call with my Portuguese tutor Francisco, he lives in Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, Brazil. I get live updates about what is happening in Brazil, my future fieldsite where I had to be this summer, from him twice a week. I listen to his complaints about Bolsonaro, see him migrating from his house to his parents and back, observe how his mood changes with the numbers of cases growing and new policies of seclusion being installed. His studies in marketing have been moved online, but he is happy that the language tutoring business is thriving—he says he has 10-15 classes every day. Today we were just talking since he was too exhausted. I told him about my doctoral project, about my unfulfilled expectations to start it this June, about uncertainties around it, about my research objects. I noticed his eyes lighting up when I mentioned that one of the collectives I attempt to research are spiritist mediums in Brazil. Apparently, he is one! He realized that last year, when he saw the spirit of a man who previously used to live in his parents' house hanging out in their kitchen. He agreed to help me with my research and be my informant! I think I will stop throwing up now.

[...]

April 14<sup>th</sup> 2020, 10 am

My friend called. The one that a few weeks ago suggested to plan a trip to Texas. Now she says she has rented a house in Mississippi by the lake. She and her husband made an executive decision and they are definitely going. I explained to her that I cannot afford any luxurious trips at the moment. She said that they will give me a generous discount. As much as this idea sounded crazy a few weeks ago, now I am starting to see myself in the deep south, sitting on the porch and sipping some sweet tea. The stickiness and humidity of the air soaking to my skin. New York is alright, and the cheerful claps every night at 7pm (today I went all in and banged some pots and pans) give hope. The daily cheer for the essential workers also provides an opportunity to greet my neighbors. The couple

across the street looks very friendly. Despite this daily splash of positivity, I still feel caged. Both in my apartment and my thoughts.

April 15<sup>th</sup>, 6pm

We are in all seriousness contemplating going to Mississippi. But can we? Shouldn't the national guard at the border stop us and send us back? Can we even cross states? Where will we sleep midway? Maybe the best idea is just to do it in one go and not to stop anywhere. Where will we stop for the bathroom? Are we endangering local communities by coming there from New York? The anthropologist inside me is actually excited to go. I can sense a lot of ethnographic material throughout this eighteen-hour journey.

[...]

April 17<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup>, the longest days so far

We did it—we managed to reach the state of Mississippi. New York has never been easier to drive through, almost disturbingly easy. We were not stopped, we were not asked what we were doing, where we were going. The whole trip was almost too easy. "We are all in this together. Keep social distancing," said one of the signs in Pennsylvania. Virginia struck me as refreshingly green, full of picturesque valleys and peaking mountains. The bible belt states perturbed us with countless gigantic crosses, confederate flags, license plates with religious references, churches around every corner, fast food restaurants, and lots of signs. "Trump, 2020." "Don't worry about the future, it has not come yet." "Trump hates fags." "If you have time to worry, you have time to pray more." Gas stations were empty, and we were the only ones wearing masks and gloves. We decided to treat ourselves with the southern *délicatesse* of chick-a-filet. The drive-through pickup line was long but worth the wait. The front of the car served us as a table.

The very last stop was Walmart at Lucedale, the nearest town from the place my friends rented. I have never been to a shop that was huge and empty. In comparison to New York, where lines to enter Trader Joe's were around 3 blocks, Walmart was operating business as usual. Barely any of the

shoppers were wearing masks and definitely not 100% of the staff. The middle-aged woman at the counter showered us with the southern hospitality, smile, and laughter. Although my inner barometer could not indicate the level of her genuinity. When her co-worker came to chat with her, she complained about how tired she is and said she is thinking of leaving this job. "I just don't care if you fire me," she said, "I have shares on Amazon."

Hans Blumenberg (1997) in his "Shipwreck with Spectator" observes that "In the field of representation, shipwreck is something like the "legitimate" result of seafaring, and a happily reached harbor or serene calm on the sea is only the deceptive face of something that is deeply problematic" (p. 9). We reached our harbor—a majestic four bedroom house near the private lake, which at night explodes from the sounds of frogs croaking. We found our own serenity in Mississippi, but the serenity of Mississippi Covid19-wise is almost disturbing. Social distancing is not something that is visible and tangible here. So much more is happening underneath the soil of this wetland and it is almost a pity that it is not the Covid-19 hysteria.

April 20<sup>th</sup>, 6:08 pm

Although Mississippi has been our home for only a few full days, I keep replaying images of the distressed New York. It almost feels that I can relive my emotions more sharply. The visual of an empty Brooklyn bridge is stuck in my head. As if leaving the shipwreck of NYC, the privileged position of the insider, placed me in a better view of a remote spectator. I am enjoying a cup of my late afternoon earl grey in the porch, hiding from the intense spring sun. Yesterday I forgot to put sunscreen on, and my arms and legs burnt. How does the fact that I am in this safe harbor (where the only thing I have to worry about is my red limbs) affecting my memories about New York?

April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 9pm

We decided to stay for another week. An 18 hour trip after only a few days in this southern paradise does not seem like a fair deal. Today I cooked some pasta with shrimp, and we played cards sipping red wine. Few last days meshed into each other. It is not clear where they end where they be-

gin—they are all pleasantly calm, soothing, and serene. I read books, write to my friends, swim in the lake and relax on a chaise longue in the backyard. We were supposed to have a call with our friends in New York, but I completely forgot. Completely forgot that there my friend Alex still sees semi-trucks with dead bodies in them. It seems that the situation in New York is getting relatively better, and some states are considering opening.

April 26<sup>th</sup>, 8:30 pm

[...]

Life in Mississippi flows without any significant disturbance. The next day on our walk, we will see the women with messy grey curly hair passing by again. She goes fishing at the Dream Strike lake, the lake visible through my bedroom window. In the emptiness, vastness, and spaciousness of nature and self-imposed effortless social distancing, the virus cannot find its ways in Lucedale, Mississippi.

April 28<sup>th</sup>, 11 am

Time is slow, and my morning coffee never tasted better. The only disturbing thought is that we are going back to New York soon. An image of being trapped in a tiny apartment makes my stomach ache. And it is not only the spatial containment but the absence of movement freedom that bothers me. Even when you go outside, you feel somehow guilty for walking and even breathing. To sustain the positivity and to redirect my thoughts, I stopped reading news. Maybe the news stopped reaching me. The mal-informed president and his inane performance, fatalistic graphs, catastrophic consequences of the market's downfall to people's lives penetrate our brains like mental bugs. As Steven Pinker (2018), a Harvard professor observes, "consumers of negative news, not surprisingly, become glum. [...] misperception of risk, anxiety, lower mood levels, learned helplessness, contempt and hostility towards others, desensitization, and in some cases, [...] complete avoidance of news."

At the beginning of the crisis, I did consume a lot of news. I would stay with my eyes wide open until 3 or 4 in the morning, and I barely ever strug-

gle to fall asleep. Pinker (2018) aims to prove that we lack conceptual tools to ascertain whether progress on the global scale has taken place or not and that the very idea of things getting better, in general, does not compute. And at the moment, my brain cannot “compute” the near-future outcome of the situation. On the one hand, the scale of the matter is so vast that it is hard to speculate its movement patterns, the accuracy of the numbers, and prediction models. On the other hand, the reaction to it can be very sudden and almost unexpected. The flights from Europe were shut in one day. It took only a few days to close local businesses and pass social-distancing orders. Should we stop in Georgia on our way to New York for a nice meal? It just doesn't sound right yet.

[...]

April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2:03 pm

Some states are opening up—pictures of people drinking lattes in Georgia and going to nail salons in Alabama are fleeing the internet. New York will remain closed. How two weeks of Mississippian wilderness will affect the remainder of time under the quarantine conditions in the Big Apple? The destabilizing moments of numbness are what I fear the most.

I just finished listening to Masha Gessen's talk about solitude and loneliness during the pandemic. She was interviewed by Simon Critchley. I enjoyed the content of the conversation almost as much as observing these two philosophers in their ordinary home environments. It is interesting to contemplate how Zoom (which became a generic word to describe the means of remote communication), amplifies social and spatial distancing. Freezing screens, cut off sounds, ability to leave or turn off the camera at any point is part of our daily communication these days. At the same time, Zoom conferencing exposes us to intimate environments, our homes. Makeup free faces and sweatpants became the new normality. While Masha was wearing a black turtleneck and a grey blazer, Simon had a Liverpool FC training top on.

Masha explained the difference between solitude and loneliness, saying that the former is an action, while the latter is a feeling. “While solitude is a philosopher's dream and a deliberately

chosen condition, loneliness can be felt amid a large crowd. Thinking happens in solitude and it requires being alone. The forced isolation, however, is the enemy of solitude—it converts to loneliness and creates conditions of losing the comfort of one's thoughts,” she said. “Loneliness,” stressed Masha, “is compounded with anxiety and fear. And now, philosophers, people whose job is to imagine the future are lonely. The idea that we might change the world is not self-evident. Indeed, philosophers were trying to cultivate self-isolation for years, and this should be a philosophical dream, but it isn't. The overwhelming sense that the world has emptied out is debilitating.” In response to the observations concerning the intellectual life, Ann Stoler's comment popped up in the QA box: “the fact that we as academics and intellectuals in the making can't ‘concentrate’ as we ‘should’ aren't able to use the privilege of this time for our own work something we can exploit feels as if we have been exposed to ourselves, that the projects we thought so important (are perhaps not), that the ‘work’ we so value is often an affect, that we perform for ourselves. We all did think that we would find space to advance our dissertations and manuscripts, but we got caught in the privilege and the protections that we have built around our lives.”

The delineation of loneliness resulting from COVID and exaggerated version of isolation that was already part of our modern life is, however, thin. “When I pass a shopping mall biking, I cannot tell the difference between a closed or opened shopping mall. We see our pre-conditions exaggerated. In a crisis, we become more ourselves. Loneliness is endemic to contemporary American life,” acutely notices Masha. Indeed, sometimes I catch myself comparing how my street looked before the crisis and during it. I contemplate how I utilized these public spaces and what role they played in my life, what was home to me, and how its perception is changing through this experience.

Masha also noticed that “things just happen too quickly and become new common sense/new reality at the speed of light. We are witnessing the disappearance of society, the loss of time and space—the Arendtian totalitarian loneliness. Distance has become an abstraction. We live close to our families, but we cannot see them. So many

connections are not occurring anymore. Even Trump, who thrives on masses and rallies, is destabilized.” The crowd he is continually facing (and recently has refused not to) is not his personal favorite—they are informed and seeking-for-answers journalists. “While Trump was in denial,” noticed Masha, “the country was functioning with no disruptions. The bureaucratic machine was not malfunctioning, it worked as it was supposed to work. It is not designed to consider the possibility of failure. Nationalism has become the answer. Nationalism offers the promise of the divine and a way to break with loneliness. It is the last resort of locating yourself, a safety hub. Countries of Europe closed the borders as an automatic gesture. And that’s terrifying.” “We find ourselves in the Hobbesian state,” responded Simon to Masha’s reaction to self-isolation of the European nations.

At the very end of the talk, Simon asked whether “the pandemic can be envisioned as a portal for new possibilities. And if so, what is it a portal to?” To finish the conversation, Masha raised a few questions: “Can we think about the interconnectedness of the world without thinking about national borders? What is school for? The crisis has shown that school in modern society is for warehousing children. Do we want to warehouse our children when we return to society?”

May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 11:pm pm

It is our last day in Lucedale, Mississippi. We are leaving for New York tomorrow. Everything was perfect today. Midday corn with butter and chili flakes, an improvised football match, even the walk during the golden hour passing the abhorrently smelling farm, a sunset yoga practice with an audience of around a dozen fisherman in the lake and an evening discussions by the hypnotizing fire reminiscing good old pre-corona days. We miss bars, saunas in the gyms, freedom just to go whatever one’s eyes see and feet take. The highlight of the day, we all agree, was the face-to-face encounter of the lady we saw the other day. When we talk about her, we call her Darlene.

Darlene: “You guys are leaving tomorrow, right? You guys sure enjoy walking, the fishing isn’t good today, but you guys don’t like to fish anyways.”

James: “I’d like to learn to fish.”

Darlene puts her fishing rod down and comes closer (closer than the recommended 6 feet): “Sorry I’m hard of hearing, you guys leaving tomorrow? Yeah, I’ve been fishing a lot, I used to work at the drugstore, but I quit, now I collect unemployment. I like to be surrounded by people. My husband passed away 17 years ago. In this lake, most people just put the fish back, but if I catch something, I’ll take it home and cook for my kids. I know the family that used to live in that house. The kids are all grown up now and have left. There was Michaela, Ethan, Elliot, Mia, the youngest is a doctor now in California. You heard about this corona stuff? It’s bad, it’s horrible. We’ve had 14 cases in George County—that’s this county. People not wearing masks and whatnot. I used to get my hair done once a week. I don’t go anymore, too dangerous now.”

James: “Are those your horses next door?”

Darlene: “No, those horses belong to Marty Davis. He has two kids—they ride. You better enjoy your walk now, walk on. This is the real country of America. The country. Are you guys leaving tomorrow? Have a safe trip. You must be leaving in the morning cos the cleaner will come in, next people coming in around 4.”

May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 9:30 pm

Today we left Mississippi. Instead of dividing our trip into two days, we split it into three. Our goal for today was Nashville, Tennessee, and we reached it. Tennessee is one of the states that was supposed to open up, but once we were there, it did not feel like open. Maybe because we arrived in the middle of the storm. The drive for the last hour was horrifying. We could see the tops of the trees reaching the ground, and our humongous Chevrolet Equinox (appropriate for the American road trip) was sliding to the sides of the road. I sheltered inside our car, while James ran into the hotel we have booked for the night. He came back all drenched in rain and breathless. Our hotel lost electricity, and we had to drag our stuff upstairs via the side door. None of the staff in the hotel were wearing masks. They gave us a presidential suite (although it did not feel very presidential in a hotel of a lower budget), which indicated that there are only that many people staying. After the storm calmed down and the rain seized,

we braved for a walk to downtown Nashville. We crossed the river, and the educational signs telling about the lynching history and slavery were guiding us to the center of it all. The shiny signs of the bars and music venues were intensely pulsing as if inviting people to come in, but there wasn't a soul around. The main streets, the focal veins of the city, which in normal circumstances were floating with drunken bodies and country music sounds, were apocalyptically quiet. Except Hooters was open, but nobody was inside, just a lonely host.

Out of nowhere, a bachelorette party of three with all appropriate attributes popped up. They were drinking champagne from the bottle and taking pictures. I secretly wish I had taken a photo of them. My stomach was upset with the fast-food meal from Sonic. The 1000 calorie burger just sat there, refusing to be digested. We found an ice cream shop on our way back, and a vanilla scoop on a cone and a cup of black tea helped me to feel alive again. My sugar must have dropped. The electricity in the hotel was still gone, so we dwelled in complete darkness saving batteries of our phones and computers. Instead of navigating social media, we were traversing the empty corridors of the ghost hotel and the tunnels of our minds. We were witnessing a historical moment, and Nashville revealed it in its eminence. James, being a black brit, was wrapping his head around the signs about the lynching being right to all these bars and restaurants. He found that contrast to signify the entire microcosm of America – deep traditions of country music side by side with slavery and racism. And the pandemic circumstances made that disparity to stand out even sharper.

May 5<sup>th</sup>, 8 pm

We are back in the city. The sun rays wrapped the skyline of Manhattan upon our entrance through the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, connecting Staten Island and Brooklyn. The rest of the trip through Ohio and then Pennsylvania was uneventful, but scenic. The 76 highway from Pittsburgh, where we spent a night, to New York unveiled the northeastern greenery, rocky landscapes, valleys, and flats. In contrast, to the southern humidity and heat, the air was crispy and fresh. But huge signs screaming, "Trump 2020" were the same. For a few hours, we sang along the famous road trip songs—Hotel

California and likes. Under the cheerfulness of our voices, one could sense an aftertaste of sweet bitterness of going back home. When I opened the door to my apartment, it looked like a dollhouse. The cheap Wayfair furniture seemed so small and comic in juxtaposition to the real and adultlike furnishings of the Mississippian lake house. The windows looked dusty, and the plants half alive. I did not plan on leaving them for that long. Smith street was busier than two and a half weeks ago. In general, on the road and the city, the atmosphere relaxed. People might be getting tired.

[...]

May 12<sup>th</sup>, 3:31 pm

It is hard to be with myself sometimes and my mood, which tends to fluctuate like a rollercoaster, does not bring easiness. There is a possibility our lives will be like this for months and months and any intellectualization of the current state just does not feel like making it better.

May 17<sup>th</sup>, 9:54 pm

Mayor De Blasio warned New Yorkers that he would not allow for the big apple to turn into New Orleans. On Friday at 7 pm, it was still around 25 degrees when I finished my last obligation for the semester—the Portuguese exam. On my way to Greenpoint to see James and celebrate my alleged freedom, I was thinking to myself that it does not feel like quarantine any more. Cars were blasting music, and the heat, which had accumulated throughout the first hot day in the city was evaporating from the asphalt. I instantly felt elevated, and the shivers of excitement tiptoed my skin—this is exactly how New York summer feels. I was biking as fast as I could to soak in the breeze of the river. The sea of mouthless faces, covered with all sorts of masks, merged into the background of the invisible tunnel of motion that I was in. Dispensable blue, and minimal black masks, repurposed scarfs, and trendy ones with ornaments or floral prints. On rare occasions, when I had to stop at the red light, I kept looking around. The beehives were forming around bars with their fronts widely opened for the thirsty populace of the city. Indeed, resembling New Orleans, the Jewel of the South. It



looked as if the heat had shoved people from the chambers of solitude into this communal feast. As if Dante's *Alighieri's* 2nd circle of hell, where souls are blown about in a violent storm, were yawning wide open, but in a positive, almost liberating and slightly inappropriate way for the given situation.

[...]

May 29<sup>th</sup>, 2:59pm, one of the first days of protests

We are pulled over by the police. James once mentioned that there is nothing else he wants to avoid in the US as a black person more than being stopped by the police. And here we are in this surreal, almost Kafkaesque, moment. We glimpse at each other, looking for confirmation in each other's faces that this is actually happening. James steers a bright white sporty Mercedes towards the right lane and stops. We open the window on the passenger side, who happens to be me.

Policeman #1: Hello, my name is This and That. We pulled you over because your speed was 90 miles per hour (James swears it could not be more than 80!), 25 miles per hour more than the allowed 65 limit. You just passed us without even slowing down a notch. Where are you heading in such a hurry?

Me: we are going to Virginia for a week of quarantine.

Policeman #1: is there a reason you were speeding up so much?

Me: hmmm... this is a rental car, and we must not be feeling it quite well yet.

Policeman #1: can you please give us your registration and insurance documents?

James hands him a long receipt (almost Duane Reade long) from the rental company. I start viciously browsing through the documents in the compartment in front of the passenger seat. I sigh with relief in my head after I spot a rectangular piece of paper wrapped into the plastic with the word "insurance" on it. Policeman #1 also asks for both of our IDs. He heads to the car with James' driver's license and my passport.

Policeman #2 (pops up out of nowhere and abruptly starts interrogating): We were just wondering what the relationship between you two is? After looking at your documents, we noticed that

you two are from two completely different countries. How did you meet?

Me (surprised): he is my boyfriend...

Whether it is the background noise of a freeway or my accent unusual for the Delaware locals, he leans in (not wearing a mask) looking confused. He asks to repeat what I just said. James has to shout that we are dating and that we met through a company that we used to work together. While we are trying to lay out the history of our friendship, he keeps suspiciously glancing at the back seat.

Policeman #2: What is in that jar with the green substance at the back seat?

We both look at each other and smile.

James and Vaida in unison: a smoothie!

I explain to the policeman #2 that I prepared smoothies for the trip and that we just drank them.

Policeman #2: are there any other substances in the vehicle that we should know about?

James and Vaida in consonance: nope, nothing.

Policeman #2 also asks about what we are doing in this country. James explains that we live here, and both have visas. I jump in, telling him that I am on a student visa. Policemen #2 seems to be intrigued by my studies. He asks to name the university as well as the program I am in. Finally, he walks away. We patiently wait, I also snap at James and ask not to answer questions instead of me next time.

We see policeman #2 through our side mirrors approaching again.

Policeman #2: do you, by any chance, have any documents indicating your addresses?

Vaida: I actually happen to have a few bills in my backpack since I intended to pay them during this trip. Here you go – my electricity bill.

James (no wonder!) does not happen to have a bill with him, so the policeman #2 has to write down his address on the envelope issued by Con Edison. The officer leaves again and comes back with a ticket. Policemen #2 underscores that this time they reduced our speed to 80 miles per hour and wishes us safe travels. The ticket states:

"State of Delaware

Uniform Complaint and Summons

The undersigned, being duly sworn, upon his oath, deposes and says

On 5/29/2020 at 1459

Name: James X

Address: X, Brooklyn



Sex: Male, Race: Black, Ethnic Origin: Non-hispanic

Violations: Speeding in Excess of Posted Limits”

We keep silent for a while. Both re-running this conversation in our heads. Why were they interested in our relationship? I half-joking half-serious ask James whether they thought that he kidnapped me or something.

May 30<sup>th</sup>, 8 pm

This quote from New York Times, sums it all: “The symbolism of a billionaire-owned, for-profit space company launching astronauts high above the heads of thousands of people protesting state brutality and oppression amid a global pandemic and economic collapse should not be lost on anyone.”

June 1<sup>st</sup>, 11:28 pm

Today, on the sixth day of protests, I cried and cried and cried. At one point, I felt vulnerable and so microscopic in the turn of events. I snapped at James again. As the day unfolded, I kept providing him “feedback” on how his behavior can improve. I was lost in my feelings, bursts of emotions. I could no longer draw a boundary between the inner and outer triggers of the deep sadness tearing my body, incapacitating it to concentrate on daily chores. My chest area was aching with grief and sorrow. The president has finally got out

of the bunker. He did not acknowledge systemic racism. He did not talk about necessary structural changes, about dissected America, about misery and ingrained hierarchies that blasted the long-overdue abscess of societal pus. I cried for lost lives, for people marching, for women, for inequality, for essential workers, for humanity. We joined the protest here in Virginia yesterday, but today I felt like crying is my only option. Corona, the only way you are still visible is the sea of black masks. Who would have thought that wearing or refusing to put on a mask would have become a political act? We wear them to stop the virus, but the masks cannot mute the voices of the unheard.

[...]

June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 9:10 am

The city is going crazy. Yesterday my friend Asta, who resides in Harlem, sent me a minute-long recording of fireworks blasting in the neighborhood. “During the day neighbors are partying and when it gets quieter, the fireworks start. During the work week, constructions are going on. No silence at all. Thus, I am so tense,” she wrote. Twitter is blasting with tweets that the semi-professional firework shows all over New York skies have coincided with the protests and are being used to unsettle communities of color.

. . .

## **“When I am awake, I spend a lot of time staring at my roommate’s cat.”**

SONIA YUHUI ZHANG

*I am a graduate student at the New School studying anthropology. My parents and I decided to stay at home in Shanghai until the second week of Spring semester so that we could celebrate Chinese New Year together. When I boarded the plane to New York at the end of January, there had been about 60 cases in Shanghai and my parents and I haven’t left our apartment for weeks. A week later, I was told that a member of my late grandfather’s family died of COVID-19 in Wuhan. I spent the first half of the semester commuting from Bedstuy, Brooklyn to school in Union Square, Manhattan for classes (it’s about 50 minutes one-way), but I tried to avoid unnecessary outings, being weary of the potential of a global outbreak and the ongoing anti-Asian sentiments. I have also been in touch with my family scattered in various cities in China.*

*When COVID-19 in New York elevated as a public health crisis in Mid-March, airplane ticket prices skyrocketed and I soon received the news that China no longer allows non-Chinese citizens to enter. Although all of my family members live in China and I spent most of my childhood and adolescence there, my nationality is New Zealand. I am now staying at my Brooklyn apartment which I share with five other people and one cat. After my lease ends in June, my options are either to wait for the removal of travel restrictions to China or go to Auckland, New Zealand, where my closest contact would be a family friend.*

2020.3.28 Sat

I have been missing my sleep window in the past week. I get extremely sleepy at about 9, but it feels too early for bed, and it’s about time my parents in Shanghai wake up and start texting me. Are you and your roommates staying in? Remember to drink water and exercise. What’s your temperature? Tell us if you are scared. After a mixture of replying and playing Animal Crossing, I go to bed at 12, struggle until 1, then open my eyes and realise I’m no longer tired.

In the 1-hour-struggle for today, I kept thinking about the messages I received. My late grandfather’s partner sent me a long message about how her family coped with the nearly three-month-long quarantine in Wuhan: only ordering grocery delivery, going downstairs wearing hats, masks and gloves, sanitising everything before entering the apartment, letting bags stay on the balcony for at least two hours before opening them. It’s so difficult, but protecting ourselves was the only thing we could do for the nation, she said.

My aunt sent me short videos of her demonstrations of covering door handles and toilet flush with tissue paper. Sanitisers don’t kill the virus instantly, of course tissues are better. Now in our el-

evators the buttons are sanitised several times a day, but I still only touch them with a tissue. They can survive on metal surfaces for days!

At a time when the stabilisation of knowledge is not nearly in sight, those with experience claim the truth.

[...]

2020.3.29 Sun

[...]

My roommates asked me today if I am wearing masks in the kitchen because of them going out for groceries, and whether I will feel safer if they wear masks too. It made me feel sad. It is true that I get nervous every time I hear them using the apartment door, and I try to not go out of my room until unpacking is finished. But I also gladly take the delivery boxes they bring up. Wearing masks for me have always been perfectly normal: people at home wear them when having a common cold; some of my female friends put on a mask simply when they are not happy with their looks. I

thought people here were stubborn to find it hurtful and offensive. But hearing my roommates asking me whether they should wear it still makes me feel I have imposed some unfair standards onto them, that I am using my judgemental acts to put pressure onto the house.

2020.3.30 Mon

I'm not sure if I am influenced by the zoom meetings or simply hit a long enough time, today I started to feel like I rather get some air than scrolling through endless emails and messages. Even though I have work to do, I feel all my time has been meshed into a lethargic blob. Even playing Animal Crossing has become a bit of a repetitive business. I was slowly reading a passage in *The Book of Disquiet*: "I'm sleeping while awake, standing by the window, leaning against it as against everything...And I don't know what I feel or what I want to feel. I don't know what to think or what I am." But Pessoa had the choice to let himself adrift walking in the street. His whining turns into relentless expression and a committed masterpiece. I read only to ease my guilt from idleness.

2020.4.1 Wed

Half way in a Zoom meeting, I realised it is precisely a year since my grandfather passed away. If he is still alive, he would be living in the neighbourhood only a few blocks away from the seafood market where the COVID-19 outbreak started. Perhaps it's lucky that he didn't have to go through that hospital system breakdown in his last days, my parents said. I agree with them, but I still wish to have messages with my grandfather. He would have a lot to say about quarantine life, he would write long articles and save them in his secret mobile autobiography.

In my room, there is a miniature hourglass sealed in a plastic block, beside it is a Chinese idiom written in old-fashioned font: "Be content with oneself". I found the block on the floor of my grandfather's flat in the morning of his memorial service, and my family said I can take it with me. Perhaps he would suggest the same if he is still alive. The thought made me feel better.

2020.4.2 Thur

[...]

Laundry and grocery shopping are my least favourite housework, but today I was excited because it would be my first time leaving the apartment in three weeks! The sun was still shining when Volkan and I stepped out of the gate at around 3:30, there were only a few people in the street and some were wearing masks. Wonderful masks!

The excitement lasted for less than five minutes. When we crossed the street, wind started to blow and a box of trash flew towards us. I felt some particles in my eyes. In the supermarket, Volkan pushed me around (caringly) so I will not be too close to other people, while others seem to not care about squeezing past us. The floor was moist and covered with black prints of shoes. Shopping baskets were put onto the floor then stacked together at the entrance. It made me think of the Tsukiji fish market I once visited, when a friend had to push me all the time so I didn't get run over by the merchants' mechanic carts full of dead fish eyes staring at us.

After we returned to the apartment, I took a bottle and frantically sprayed everything: the door handles, the shoes, the shopping bags, the surfaces of every single grocery item. Volkan sighed as I stopped responding to him. My roommate's cat made a big fuss, meowing and jumping. I guess my roommates could only smell bleach instead of their food. With all reasons to feel bad, I was just glad I'm finally home.

[...]

2020.4.4 Sat

I woke up from bad dreams and felt extremely tired. Yesterday night at 10.04 I saw my mum's message that there is a 3-minute silence practiced in China for the dead from the pandemic. I missed it. Over this week people who I haven't spoken with for ages reach out to me and ask about New York. It's worse than Wuhan in January, they say. Hearing that the precautions in zero-increase cities are way more meticulous than New York at

the moment, the epicenter of Covid makes me worry more.

[...]

2020.4.6 Mon

I woke up feeling angry about my headache, my sore throat, and my hands and feet that never seem to warm up. Then I became determined to freak out about the apartment floor. My roommate's cat strolled into my room as usual, but this time I grabbed her and wiped her feet with my face cleansing cloth for sensitive skin (brutal, I know). She struggled out of my arms and licked her paw, her ears immediately turning backwards. *Disgusting!* She looked at me, left, and came back in five minutes. She walked along the edge of my room and sat behind me, a path without my arms' reach.

When I started the Zoom chat on collective diary writing, the cat cleaned herself with utter thoroughness and commitment. I am always amazed by how her sleepy drools smell yucky but when she showers her saliva has a flowery scent. Usually this is the time for petting. She would extend her neck and start purring. But this time she shunned from my hand. Then she fell asleep, a foot dangling out of the bed. I put my hand on her feet and she immediately put her hands over it. *Those are my feet. I take care of my own feet.*

2020.4.7 Tue

What was supposed to be a nap became a heavy dream. I was in a volley ball field, the ball flying high in the air, ready to drop towards me. I know it would break my arm but I have to take it for the team. Then I felt myself lying in the bed, the enormous heaviness of the volleyball pressing me into the depth of the mattress. I tried to move my lips and eyes, but they were sealed. I finally forced one eye open and saw my roommate soaking everything from the fridge in water mixed with soap and bleach. I wanted to get to the kitchen so I can sanitise my items on my own, but my arms are in the bed. I felt my muscles dissolving and bones softening.

I woke up with a worsened headache, my body without strength to move.

2020.4.8 Wed

Today at noon I saw a bug flying around in the bathroom. It made me realise it's already warm enough that insects are waking up, coming to life. Soon spiders and centipedes will start crawling into my room; I will have to count on my roommate's cat's hunter instinct to not encounter them. I remember at the start of the COVID outbreak, when it was only happening in places where winter is cold and long, everyone was hopeful about the warm weather killing the virus in a few months. Yesterday the WHO just published colourful leaflets saying it won't be the case. In an email exchange, my advisor mentioned that many of us might get COVID before having a vaccine. This seems to be a general belief now. I wonder what summer will look like this year. I wonder whether one day COVID will show up in an ethnographic story of multi-species coexistence.

[...]

2020.4.11 Sat

Skyping with my parents usually makes me feel more anxious about Covid than usual; they remind me too much of the numbers on the media and the details of daily life that I have already become numb to. There are always more precautions to be taken, and it's important that my roommates all follow the same standard. "Staying healthy is ten times more difficult for you than for us back then!" My mum said half-jokingly, then told me how I should develop my leadership and inspire my roommates to take care of each other. I don't know how to think about this suggestion-leadership? How am I going to ask my roommates for precautions that no one else thinks would be effective? Isn't leadership just arrogance? Maybe I will understand my mum if I went to business school instead.

2020.4.12 Sun

My prospect of going back to China is getting grim. I'm less worried about China's travel restrictions towards non-citizens. Even if they lift it, international flights are only getting riskier: yesterday there was a surge of imported cases of 52

people, 51 coming from the same flight. My dad also reminded me that if I go home over summer I might not make it back to school if the U.S. does not remove their travel restrictions. Am I going to spend the next three months in this house too? I enjoy spending time with my roommate's cat, my cooking skills are improving and I have started to sense myself getting into an organised routine, but the thought of spending the next three months without seeing my parents still hurts me.

[...]

2020.4.13 Mon

I really like the sound of rain. I woke up at 11 am. Outside the window is a perfectly grey sky; the only thing on schedule is cooking food and the Zoom meeting with fellow COVID diarists. I would take my time to finish "The Sick Rose" before looking at the online lectures for this week. I put on a sweater with a lot of colours.

At the Zoom meeting, we started with an exchange on recent interactions with COVID, mostly with the idea of it. Then an unfinished discussion on how to go about this omniscient narrator; Nick asked if anyone read the book he recommended and we shook our heads with guilty smiles. I can't tell if the meeting was frustrating or hopeful for each person, but the thought of writing something beyond my own universe at this time feels very fitting.

Half way through the meeting, the room became incredibly hot and humid; when I opened the window, I realised the rain had stopped yet the sky looked heavier. My roommate's cat woke up from the corner of my bed and jumped onto the window. Within a few minutes, rain started pouring down. The sound is so overwhelming, it makes all my thoughts silent. The cat rose her head towards the sky, her eyes slightly closed, breathing gracefully. The pouring sound disappeared. The sun gleams in the pale blue sky, pieces of white cloud move quickly. A cooling breeze comes in. The trees and flowers must look like crystals. Even the trash-infused roadsides will look shiny. Maybe this is the start of the summer days.

\*\*\*

Volkan and I took a walk outside after the rain. It was warm (20C) and the streets were tranquil. So few people. The soaking wet trash stays on the ground. Out of the people we passed by, most wore a mask. We tried to open Duane Reade's door, a woman smiled and told us they are queuing, a short line where people are so far apart. After about 20 minutes, a staff with gloves, a mask and a sunhat let us in. We bought chips, milk, ice-cream, cookies, sparkling water, orange juice. Everything but essential goods. The counter staff were in masks and gloves too, wiping everything; we had to pass the items down the hole of the huge plastic board that blocks us and them.

It's my first time walking in my neighbourhood feeling safe and cheerful.

[...]

2020.4.21 Tue (written in retrospect)

The presence of home has been very strong in my apartment room lately. My mum has shipped three packages to me so far, full of masks and gloves safety goggles. The latest package had two protective suits in it, "wear it if you go on a plane," my mum says on Skype proudly. I have been seeing photos of students returning to China in white suits at the boarding gate and in the plane - looks like a shot from the movie "Contagion". My parents keep telling me reassuring things back home and we spend most of the time talking about protective measures, but I know little of their work situations. Are they really okay?

[...]

2020.4.26 Sun (written in retrospect)

I napped until 3.30 p.m., and Volkan suggested we should go out while the sun is still there. It shines beautifully outside, and there isn't any trash to bring down because my four roommates have already been out today; no one wants to miss the good sunshine. My head was still heavy and a bit painful from an excessive nap, but as soon as we went under the sun we were skipping and dancing in the street, my plastic gloves making a very funny sound. A man was sitting at the stairs with a big scary dog behind him; he said hi and wished

us safety. We ordered a huge pizza and discovered restaurants we have never heard of before. It was a nice sunny afternoon.

2020.4.27 Mon

I have been slacking the past two weeks. I'm pretty sure I've lost it. Instead of sleeping in the night and working in the day, I have been sleeping periodically like my roommate's cat, the "poor creature forever in quarantine". I stopped looking at the news. Reading for class goes into one of my eyes and immediately flows out from the other. I have no thoughts about them and no memories of them.

When I am awake, I spend a lot of time staring at my roommate's cat, crying a little bit when I want to. She is not even my cat, but I have spent the majority of my past year in this apartment with her. She is very vocal—I wake up with her meows and howls and wows, she purrs loudly, and when I run into her resting on Volkan's chest she will look at me with a sharp "Ah!" then run off. Her pupils can be very small like a hunter, and very big like a Snapchat filter. When I was writing my PhD applications at 4 a.m. last semester, she would come in, stare at me, go to sleep, then get crazy over the birds chirping outside the window. I decided I should write an application that a cat can understand, but that didn't work.

Before the quarantine, I would let her into my room and chase her out when my roommates are back home; in this way we all get to see the cat for a fair amount of time. With the lockdown, however, we are constantly at home and the boundaries have been breached. She is spending less time with her parents, and she would sleep at the mat or bench outside my room for a while if I keep my door closed. Maybe I should stop seeing her so as not to upset my roommates, but I really like watching her breathe in a ball shape when she sleeps, and I don't like the thought of her standing in the hallway on her own when no one pays attention to her. I can't believe if I move out after June this will be the end of it—no more meowing and barging into my room, no more furry face with so many questions and demands. I would occasionally visit my roommate, stroke the cat for a minute or two, and when I leave she will stand under a chair in the corner, eyes staring adamantly at the floor.

2020.5.1 Thu

On Tuesday I started the game "Ancestors: The Humankind Odyssey" and have been unable to stop. I probably slept for about 15 hours in total over the last four days. In the game I am an ape—or a clan of apes—in prehistoric times trying to survive the jungle, pass generations, and eventually evolve into other hominid species. I could hear nothing but sounds of animals howling, the trees and foliage in the jungle all looked the same, and before I could orient myself a wild boar dashed over and killed my clan members. Sometimes I get killed myself too; then the system immediately switches to the next surviving member trying to run away from blood and roars. It trains you to forget about the individual.

I have only felt this much fear and stress in nightmares. Crawling amongst the trees make me risk starving and falling to death; going by the stream for foraging makes me vulnerable to predators. I can hold certain keys to decipher my senses of smell and hearing, but that takes time too and the signals in my field are overwhelming. How did the first hominids ever make it out of the jungle? How many clans were killed, species went extinct before they figured out stone axes and wooden sticks to scare off predators? What did it take for evolution to take the path it has, so that now *Homo sapiens* can kill off their ape relatives? My fingers were sore and they were shaking with the PS4 handle.

After four days of almost non-stop playing I am still at a very elemental level in the game; my school work is lagged behind and I am rushing through my readings and writings; there is no way I could play this game in a normal semester. Is it laughable that I used the concentration window granted by Covid lockdown for a survival game rather than reading for my research? It probably is...I have to get back to work soon.

[...]

2020.5.9 Sat

I can't believe I am graduating next week; I said to my parents on screen.



2020.5.15 Fri

The graduation recognition ceremony yesterday was a good one: I put on my favourite dress, did make-up, made cocktails with Pimms, ginger ale and fruit pieces. The Pimm's bottle is a birthday present from two years ago, when my friends from the UK visited me for the first time. Almost half of the cohort is in my apartment; we decided to watch the ceremony together on TV in the living room and we laughed a lot at the disconnections, at the chat window (especially when Ann typed "We can't hear you!") and at each other. My parents were a bit upset about getting up at 6 am to find a bad streaming service that they can't open without a VPN. Oops.

Today's commencement is more or less similar, though it felt less intimate and relevant. Just two months ago, when I was in Juliana's car, taking a ride from Troy, we were talking about how we can buddy up at the ceremonies if our parents don't come along. Now Juliana is in Vermont with her family, her smile looking as peaceful as always on the video screen. I'm in my apartment with my cohort, typing things to our family on messenger apps. Volkan would have been back in Turkey, but here he is passing me cakes, holding my hand and taking photos of us. My roommate's cat sits at the corner of the sofa with a sullen face; she is obviously annoyed but she can't help but stay close to humans.

I still think it would be nice to dress up in our gowns, go up the stage and get our papers in a fancy auditorium. But this is good.

[...]

2020.5.19 Tue

I wrote my last final paper until 8 am on Monday and completed the bibliography this afternoon. The professor for this course said everyone gets an A even if they do nothing, and my final project is more like a research assistance about a Chinese poet. But yesterday I realised its relevance to my research and became a bit absorbed in it. Hence the all-nighter.

I do think I deliberately left the project until the last minute for fun, since I haven't been sleeping so irregularly for a while. But I end up regretting

this: I feel terribly sleepy and dizzy all the time since Monday, and I feel like I have become stupid.

During the time, some kind of intense fear and pain were there. So many long-standing things get let out under the name of covid. It ferments and explodes in the apartment space like rotten fruit.

[...]

5.23 Sat

I woke up at 11, extremely sleepy, called off the Skype chat with my parents and went back to sleep. Then I woke up again at almost 3 and saw Volkan's desk almost completely empty: ants have invaded his room and no matter how many rounds of vacuum killing he does, they keep coming back. He had a packed day of readings planned out and seem very stressed. Someone jokingly said the cat isn't doing her job. When a cat that bites comes over we pet her and think she's adorable; when harmless ants crawl around we feel disgusted and obliged to kill them all.

We ended up buying insect killers from the grocery shops; everyone is wearing a mask now and more or less consciously walking in a distance from each other. But the shops have already cancelled the entrance limit, at least the two we visited. Things are relaxing very quickly.

[...]

5.24 Sun

My parents are very optimistic about flights increasing in June and school moving online in the next semester; they didn't complain when they saw my roommate's cat hanging out in my room, saying that she might know that we are parting soon.

5.25 Mon

At around 2 a.m. my roommate's cat suddenly became agitated and started pounding at the corner of my room restlessly and intensely. I turned on the lights and squatted beside her, but I couldn't see anything. After half an hour her mouth is full of dust and hair; I wiped them off and she looked

at me softly when I petted her, but as soon as I go back to bed (which is a futon spread on the matted floor) she turns to the corner again, eyes wide open, ready to jump.

I eventually dozed off with melatonin and woke up at around 10; the cat is fast asleep at the other corner of the room. There were brown, hard pieces scattered under my tea table, the spot where

she likes to rest at. There were also pieces on her fur. A black ink-like dot was on one of her paws; when I took her hand and wiped it with a facial cloth she didn't resist. Maybe there is an ant colony behind my wall; maybe she sees someone that we can't see. It's all a bit strange.

. . .

## **“I’m so consumed everyday with my kids, trying to get work done and just trying to get through the day.”**

DANA

*(Full name and biographical information excluded for reasons of anonymity.)*

March 31, 2020

I’ve started to feel the anxiety creep in after 10 days of our quarantine. Luckily, I keep active by going on a run every other day and the occasional trip to the park right behind my mother’s house. But I still come back to the same thing. I’m finding myself easily bothered by silly things, and I’ve lost count of how many times I’ve put away the same toys. Why do I even put them away? I like order. There is no order in this.

I’m worried that the anxiety I’m starting to feel will hinder any possibility of productivity. This slowly starts to turn into doubt, which then increases the anxiety. There are four adults here, three work from home and one works outside. I feel guilty sometimes asking for time for myself (for work), particularly because that requires that someone else (my mom or husband) watch my kids. My mom hurt her hip last week and it’s been a slow recovery and that also meant that she couldn’t really help watch my 9 month old, who requires close watching. So I’m left with it by myself, my husband works everyday and even if I do get some time there is constant interruption. It’s a challenging time.

April 2, 2020

What is going on? I’m so consumed everyday with my kids, trying to get work done and just trying to get through the day. I forget that the world outside is fraught with uncertainties, frustrations, fear and death. But It’s like not much has changed for me, except that my normal anxieties about what I just listed above have only increased. When I take a moment to reflect about what we’re currently experiencing I can’t help to ask “What is going on?”

I just finished listening to Former VP Joe Biden on The Tonight Show and the very first thing he starts talking about is how ‘our president took too long to take this seriously’ which to be honest really annoyed me. I mean, it doesn’t shock me, he is running for president. But, that’s all he talked about, about how Trump is not doing enough even though he has the power to do so based on some act blah blah blah. No different than a debate, it all just starts to sound like a broken record. So that’s not all he talked about but it was more than enough.

One of my students talked about the virus as an ‘invisible enemy,’ and I think it’s accurate, it feels imminent and yet distant, avoidable. Sometimes I feel that it’s all fine, and I’ll go to the store and go through all the motions of keeping my distance from people and sanitizing and washing my hands. And then I read that here in Riverside county the number of cases is almost 1K and that the neighboring city just had its first death. And I ask myself again what is going on? There’s not enough masks and ventilators and other equipment; people are being ordered to stay home, businesses are closed, doctors are not going to resuscitate patients because there are just too many patients to treat? Is this really happening? Is this enemy really that threatening?

[...]

April 6<sup>th</sup>, 2020

We had a rough morning, C woke up really early and thus woke up E. But not only did she wake up early she also woke up in a lousy mood demanding cereal at 6 am. Mix that with the six hours I got of

sleep plus the 3 times I got up to soothe E and my day is already off to a rough start. I told my husband I wished I had twisted my ankle, he knew exactly what I meant. Now I have to care for him since he is unable to walk. He said that I am needed way more than he is so I'm spared (sort of). He likened it to Pokémon, if we were Pokémon cards I would be more valuable than him.

[...]

April 7<sup>th</sup>, 2020

Today I had the worst online class since we started, and it's only the third one! To start with, my mom went to the store and didn't come back until 4 hours later! She's usually the one who watches C & E because my husband, Deniz, also teaches a class at the same time. So I had to push back our meeting time by half an hour, hoping that either my mom would be back or my husband would end soon. I sent my students an email—and I'm always skeptical when I send my students an email because I just don't know if they're reading them—letting them know that I would be late. Around 11:15 my husband finished with his class and took over with the kids. Then I went to start the meeting, but after a couple of minutes no one was joining, and I thought, 'Great, now everything is just ditching the whole meeting!' I waited a couple of minutes more and then somehow realized that I had started a new meeting instead of the one I have set up recurring. Then I found everyone perplexed because they were trying to log in but they received a message saying that I was already in a meeting. Anyway, once I figured it out we all joined in and went on with the class. Though, we might as well not have met because despite 11 students showing up, only 2 spoke. Maybe this is just

a rookie thing, but I feel like I rely too much on them to engage in a discussion. Its usually the same 2-4 students who engage. The rest are just there floating in cyber space. So I asked them if they read the piece, or if they didn't like it etc. Silence. Then Julian, one of my more reliable students said "I think people read it but it's just one of those days where people don't talk." Thank you for the sentiment Julian, but its not just this day, its everyday. I left that meeting pretty disillusioned and bummed out. I think part of the issue too, was that I was so stressed out about getting someone to watch the kids that I was not able to focus during our meeting.

[...]

April 26, 2020

I wait too long to write an entry for this diary, by the time I get the chance to sit and write I don't know where to start. The most immediate thought that comes to mind is something I have been reflecting on for the past week. There are not a lot of interesting things happening where I am that would warrant any sort of ethnographic observation. As I have written before most of what I write about and reflect on has to do with my family and the dynamics at home while we are under a stay-at-home order. What I think is happening instead is a lot of inward reflection, a close look at my surroundings, my family, my present, etc. I wonder if this is such a time for all of us to do just that. This has certainly been the case for me even before the pandemic.

[...]

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