**33 Days in Lockdown: Reflections on New Zealand’s Covid-19 State of Emergency**

Abstract: New Zealand’s 33-day, ‘level 4 lockdown’ in response to covid-19 invites anthropological reflection across a number of themes. What follows are extracts of an online anthropological diary examining the first month of the crisis as it unfolded, suggesting how social and political responses to the pandemic invite reflection upon anthropological concepts as diverse as states of emergency; healing spaces; embodiment and movement; soundscapes; the constitution of collective affect; crises and historical temporality; museum artefacts; globalism; collective pain; surveillance; and imagined biographies.

Keywords: covid-19; lockdown; New Zealand; pandemic; state of emergency

On March 26, 2020, the entire nation of New Zealand entered into an unprecedented state of emergency and ‘stay-home’ lockdown in response to the threat of covid-19. Over the next 33 days while the nation was at ‘alert level 4,’ all members of society were required to stay at home, unless purchasing essential supplies, seeking medical assistance, travelling to work in the case of essential services workers, or exercising.

 My first reaction (on Day 1) was to stand rooted in my living room, hyperventilating. It felt like two vital facets of my life felt were being stripped away – my ability to leave our suburban neighbourhood and go out into the world of nature and my participation in the intellectual life of the university. I left the house and started walking. To my surprise, I found that if I walked long enough, I encountered some quiet, woodsy nooks, and after 2.3 km, I was even rewarded with a glimpse of the sea. Later that afternoon, I launched a Facebook lockdown diary as a means of galvanising communication with colleagues and others similarly struggling to make sense of our ‘new normality’:

**Day 2/March 27: ‘blue spaces’**

NZ’s Police Commissioner took a step forward today in ensuring New Zealanders’ physical and mental wellbeing by reversing his decision that the only valid reasons for driving during lockdown would be to go to the grocery store or a medical clinic (or to work, if your job is classified as an essential service). As long as you stay local, it is now ok to drive to a park, beach or walking track in order to engage in exercise or seek some fresh air. Great to see the Commissioner thinking along the lines of the Czech physicians I interviewed for my asthma project who all spoke of the great outdoors as a site of (physical and mental) healing! Perhaps he was inspired by Foley et al.’s (2019) work on the healing power of ‘blue spaces.’ Whatever the reasoning, going outside for walks makes for much happier people.

**Day 4/March 29**: **soundscapes**

A lot has been said about how the lockdown is visually changing urban spaces – fish appearing in the canals of Venice, less air pollution around the globe. What is striking to me is the change in urban soundscapes – the absence of plane engines (for those of us living under the flight path), the missing wake-up call of the neighbour’s car which is usually started at 5:30 am every single weekday morning. Instead, I hear tuis from my bedroom window. Years ago [BLINDED FOR REVIEW] and I put together a panel on the theme of senses and citizenships at which Andrew Whitehouse spoke about how British migrants to NZ and Australia would bring birds with them to remind them of the sounds of home. Having always lived in suburbs dominated by car, bus, and other industrial noise, I didn’t really understand the idea of birds contributing to the ‘sounds of home,’ but it makes sense now.

**Day 6/March 3: solitude**

We've heard a lot about the need to combat social isolation, but I've been noticing a lot of people actively seeking out, or creating, spaces of solitude. We've discovered the golf course around the block makes for a nice open space to walk in (now that no one is allowed to play golf), but increasingly, I encounter other folks who've likewise gravitated there, searching out an opportunity to carve out ‘their own’ bit of green space, where they can be alone, even if just for a moment or two. Similarly, people seem to be using sound to create their own ‘bubble.’ On the weekend I passed houses in which the music was blaring, creating a sonic wall between themselves and the rest of the neighbourhood. I also saw a middle-aged man in his front garden, bent over what looked like an old-style transistor radio, listening to Hindi devotional songs, and via sound separating himself both from the pedestrians on the street and, it seemed, the rest of his household. As the lockdown continues, will we become even more creative in finding spaces that enable a sense of solitude?

**Day 7/April 1:** **states of emergency[[1]](#footnote-1)**

I am finding that the state of emergency literature only goes so far in helping to make sense of the current crisis as the majority of scholarly accounts (e.g. Agamben 2003; Foucault 2004), including those of the current situation (Agamben 2020; Chomsky 2020) focus on outlining how states of exception are used to unjustifiably escalate state power, leading to the imposition of authoritarian rule and privileging of the interests of elites and the private sector This is a very worthwhile endeavour, but it leaves out the possibility of justifiable states of emergency, as well as ignoring the role of the citizenry in constituting states of emergency. In these accounts, citizens tend to be portrayed as powerless, ignorant, or blinded by state power, rather than not only calling for state action, but also playing a role in constituting it.

In New Zealand, the lockdown has certainly resulted in unequal effects – and critiques of them - privileging elite interests; for example, the definition of “essential services” has clearly financially benefitted some (large) businesses rather than others (e.g. food supply monopolies as opposed to small grocers, fruit and vegetable shops, or independent butchers). Nonetheless, public sentiment has helped constitute the lockdown, and enabled it to run, for the most part quite smoothly, without the need (thus far) of significant police and military presence. In fact, before Ardern’s announcement that we would go to level 4, public discourse was dominated by demands to impose a lockdown. Many people stopped sending their kids to school *before* the schools were closed. The government message that ‘we are all in it together’ alongside Ardern’s endorsement of the Teddy Bears in Windows Movement (on the day she declared we would be moving to level 4) has been met with great enthusiasm. Just walking around our neighbourhood, you see house after house that has teddy bears or other stuffed animals on display in their front windows, symbolic messages of ‘hope,’ as one news account put it (Anonymous 2020a), and care.

And now people are taking up the work of policing the lockdown themselves – there were so many (thousands) of calls to the police, informing them of those seen infringing lockdown regulations that the police went and created a new online form for this purpose – within the first 48 hours after it was launched, people used it to report 9,600 suspected breaches of the lockdown (Anonymous 2020b). I think we need to add to the state of emergency literature greater consideration of the ways citizens’ co-constitute the affective landscape of a crisis. This may include, in some circumstances, actively investing the state with hope (for safety, security, etc.), and even blaming and shaming (and setting up for arrest) those deemed noncompliant. In these ways the citizenry does not just acquiesce but may even propel the state into action, particularly in a nation (like New Zealand) where there is a major election just a few months away.

**Day 8/April 2: museum pieces**

I was emptying out a travel bag today and out fell a leftover candy from my last overseas flight (Air NZ hands out these iconic candies to passengers just as the plane starts to descend). It felt like a memento from a different life. As Heidegger puts it in *Being and Time*, what makes a museum piece a museum piece is not the thing in itself, but the fact that it speaks to a different lifeworld. It may in fact still be of use in some contexts, but it signifies the past:

‘What were the ‘things’ [in a museum] that they no longer are today? They are still useful things, but out of use. However, if they were still in use, like many heirlooms in the household, would they then not be historical? Whether in use or out of use, they are no longer what they were. What is ‘past’? Nothing other than the world within which they were encountered as things at hand belonging to a context of useful things and used by heedful Dasein existing-in-the-world. That world is no longer’ (2010 [1953]: 362).

**Day 9/April 3**: **collective affect**

Boris Johnson has discovered ‘society,’ and this morning, I too find myself turning to Durkheim, but with respect to his insights into the constitution of collective affect. I realise that I deeply miss being with people, even though I am spending all day with people via Zoom.

I initially thought what I missed was a sense of collective intellectual engagement, but I’ve now taught an online grad seminar and taken part in an online reading group, and I still feel like something fundamental is missing from my daily life. It can’t be physical contact with others as I am not a very physical person except with close family (and they are just about all in my house, 24 hours a day now.)

I’m thinking this sense of social isolation might stem from having much less sense of how other people are feeling – I can glean a bit over audio and video but it isn’t the same as the intuitive feeling you get when you are in the same room with someone, much less with a group. As Durkheim pointed out, it isn’t a matter of 1 + 1 + 1 + 1. You can’t just add up the emotions from each little-box-of-a-person on Zoom and get a sense of ‘the vibe in the room.’ It is much more about the (often tacit, deeply embodied) ways we communicate and collectively create affect, be it ‘collective effervescence’ or something much less profound.

I can imagine spaces where this is achieved online, but thus far, the increased challenge in recognising or engaging in a sense of collective affect (plus bad sound quality, and the strain on our eyes from all these extra hours of staring at computer screens) is feeling, for me at least, like one of the big drawbacks of shifting so many social interactions online.

**Day 10/April 4: the new normal**

Certain phrases that are becoming more and more prevalent are proving jarring: the ‘new normal’ - why can’t we retain the idea that this period is decidedly abnormal, which implies that one day we will move out of it?; ‘we’re all in it together’ – except that some of us are more likely to suffer poverty, illness, and loss of rights rather than others; ‘stay in your bubble’ – as anyone who has blown bubbles with children knows, they soon pop and leave a sticky mess behind; and ‘Jacinda’ or even ‘Aunty J’ – as opposed to ‘the Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern’ – which makes it feel like she is a friend I know from the local pub, as opposed to the seat of authority and decision-making?

**Day 12**/**April 6:** **global vs national crisis**

The Queen in her speech today told her subjects (in words that seemed directed primarily at Brits, but were widely reported on here in NZ) - that they should rally themselves to best get through covid-19 (‘with good humoured resolve’), making reference to how the UK survived the Blitz. This seems to be one of many sporadic references comparing the current crisis to WWII, mostly highlighting the moral importance of social solidarity and putting a heroic frame on the need to ‘make sacrifices’ (as Ardern/Aunty J put it in an interview this morning).

But the current global state of emergency seems quite unique as, amongst other things, it lacks an external referent (other than a temporal one). As we watch this spread across the globe, there is a standing news item listing the ‘countries that don’t have covid-19,’ but I would imagine most of the people in those countries are just as fearful. Clearly this crisis has its centres and peripheries and it is an entirely different thing to be in Lombardy or New York City versus Auckland, but it is hard to shake the feeling that there is nothing exterior to this.

We might say the same about other global crises such as climate change, or the global financial crisis (how would it be if 90% of our daily mainstream newsfeed was focused on the spread of environmental damage - and there wouldn’t be a list of countries that are immune - or poverty and unemployment, complete with pink spots marking the rising figures on a global map?)

But to me there is something terrifyingly different about this. There is something about the speed and brutality of the pandemic, alongside the crucial questions it raises about how best to deploy political and social power to attempt to mitigate it, with respect to not just for a certain group of countries, but for all of us in this world, that defies comparison. I fear that using the nationalist framework of WWII deflects the fact that we need not just national solidarity but global cooperation and global strategising (and also sets an interestingly long timeframe on the period before, as the Queen put it, we can ‘return to normal times.’)

**Day 13/April 7: imagined biographies**

Yesterday Prime Minister Ardern announced a new campaign to support mental health, in light of the impact of covid-19, the expected economic downturn, and current measures requiring social isolation on mental wellbeing (Wade 2020).

We are all obviously impacted, and while the current situation may be extremely difficult for a range of people, and in particular the elderly, those with underlying health issues, or health workers, I imagine this is going to be particularly difficult for youth, who have had their sense of life trajectory so acutely disrupted. Haldis Haukanes (2013) has done some excellent work on young people’s envisioning of the future in terms of their imagined (future) biographies, and underscores that while in some cultures there is strong emphasis on the individual self steering a course forward, in others, the emphasis on relational aspects of self-creation, puts a different framing on things.

I imagine that in NZ, which is highly individualistic, many young people will be wrestling with the challenges of not knowing how to ‘reset their course’ with the uncertainties and anxieties of covid-19 in terms of employment, education, and just daily living under lockdown. I see it in some of my students who seem already crushed by their inabilities to envision (positive) futures for themselves. I wonder if recasting the focus from ‘how will I ever cope’ to something more akin to ‘how will society make its way through this’ might take some of the pressure off? At least what we (myself and the university lecturers who I’ve spoken with) keep stressing to our students is that they are not going through this alone, as – frighteningly – many of them seem to see it as their challenge, their struggle, their inability to cope (or, as one student put it to me yesterday, his inability to be productive while in lockdown, as if everyone else was running around writing theses/dissertations at a terrific rate).

Is there some way to provide mental health resources without making it another task that each individual has a responsibility to take up – i.e. mental health resources that focus on a society (or in this case, the world) going through turmoil, rather than an individual struggling in a changing social/economic/context?

**Day 16/April 10: bodies as weapons**

The Labour government is repeatedly suggesting we need to be aware of what moving out of the lockdown will look like, once we get there. At the same time, the NZ news is full of increasing reports of people using their bodies as weapons during lockdown. These appear to be occurring along two registers – domestic violence against those who are already engaged in relations of proximity (I was tempted to say relations of intimacy, i.e. intimate enough to be in the same bubble, though as someone recently pointed out to me, some of those in the same bubble are there by force of circumstance, such as lack of other housing options leading to inclusion, rather than bonds of intimacy, so let’s call it those who are already in relations of proximity).

Or, by forcibly injecting proximity into the public sphere, through bodily acts that might spread covid-19, such as spitting or coughing against the police or against general public (i.e. the news report of the man purposefully coughing on other people shopping in the grocery store). While the underlying social dynamics are quite distinct (between acts of domestic violence, spitting on the police, or coughing on shoppers), all of them seem to be suggesting that enactments of the body as a weapon are expanding, and I wonder what this will mean for how we conduct ourselves once lockdown is lifted.

Already there seems to be a wariness among strangers as to if we might be engaging in too close a physical encounter – people jump off the sidewalk and into the street if they see another person walking up the sidewalk towards them (enough to make many of us hyper vigilante while driving, as there are so many people walking in the street now). At the moment, many people seem to be trying to counter-act this by being as friendly as possible – and you have complete strangers waving, or shouting hello at you – as they leap away.

Once lockdown has ended, and we are back to sharing communal spaces, such as school classrooms, school bathrooms, coffee shops, open plan offices, how will we respond to the necessary proximities? (Social distancing can only go so far in my son’s school of nearly 2,000 kids and limited bathroom facilities). What is going to happen if a child at school starts sneezing or coughing? Will fears of contagion result in scapegoating? social ostracism? something worse?

When I was young and the world was learning about HIV/AIDS and there was paranoia across the US about HIV+ kids going to school (fears that you could catch HIV via sharing the same toilet was one of the concerns that saw HIV+ kids barred from schools). That was with respect to what is largely a sexually transmitted disease. In contrast, covid-19 spreads really easily, and the symptoms are so common that anyone with allergies, a cough, or cold, might be easily mistaken as a potential vector. What is the government doing to prepare us for that possibility? Or what can we do as a society?

**Day 19/April 13: collective pain**

Several recent images have conveyed the scale of the tragedy …. The mass graves being dug in Central Park, army trucks transporting the dead across Italy under the watchful gaze of a priest and the Italian police, the faces of new-borns in Thailand donned in protective visors. In thinking about the power of these pictures, I find myself returning to Veena Das’ (1995) descriptions of pain as a collective sensation.

There is a strongly-rooted assumption in Western culture that our embodied experiences are radically separate and containable within our individual bodies, and moreover, (as Elaine Scarry so beautifully elucidates in *The Body in Pain* (1985), that pain causes an impermeable divide, impossible to bridge through language or other intentional communicative acts, resulting in those who suffer from pain finding themselves living in a ‘separate world,’ a ‘world unmade by pain’ (Good 1992: 42). Drawing on Wittgenstein, Das problematised this in her work on ethnic and religious violence, not suggesting that one person’s pain is identical or commensurable with another’s, but rather portraying instances in which pain is inherently collective, existing beyond the confines of particular bodies.

For years I gave a lecture on social suffering where I discussed this idea, and would initially get blank looks from students, until I brought up examples of the visceral sensations you and your friends might feel while watching a horror movie. Then last year the social suffering lecture was scheduled a few days after the Christchurch terrorist attack. Both I and many of the students went to class that day feeling completely emotionally spent. When I started to talk about how we might feel the pain of another in our own bodies, it was like stating the blindingly obvious, putting words to a sensation that was already enveloping everyone in the room (and several students started to cry).

It is, for me, the same with this crisis. I can’t imagine what it feels like for those physically struck down by the virus, nor those who have lost someone due to covid-19, but I, like so many others, have found ourselves living in a world enveloped in pain. This is not my world, divided from all others. Nor, when I look at these pictures, is it my pain I am contending with. It is our pain – which is not to say that each of our sensations are somehow commensurate, but to denote how the world that has been radically altered by pain is our shared one.

**Day 20/ April 14: structural violence**

The NZ government is now putting the homeless up in hotel rooms (Corlett 2020), but many are wondering how long will this last? Like most major health crises, covid-19 throws structural violence into stark relief, underscoring poverty as the key factor in determining who – as the UN warns of disruptions to global food supplies – gets the food they need, the medical care they need, who is more likely to have ‘underlying conditions’ and have them left untreated – the things that add up to those incommensurabilities of pain and suffering. As Paul Farmer notes (2009: 23) , when it comes to extreme human suffering, ‘an inordinate share of this kind of pain is currently endured by those living in poverty.’

Sadly, many governments seem to be offering more of a helping hand now that those who are on the margins will not only be suffering more, but – and here seems to be the tipping point - it is also feared that unless they get support, they may directly infect, or enable the spread of infection through, the general populace. I had been thinking this crisis was going to require a rethinking of Adriana Petryna’s (2002) biological citizenship, but now I wonder if a closer match is some version of Achille Mbembe’s ‘necropolitics’ (2003), but rather than it being death or extreme injury that makes some people/some bodies take on political meaning, it is their perceived potential to spread infection to others?

That said, the media seems to be more keen than usual to recognise these discrepancies, being it highlighting the widening gap between celebrities and their audiences as they go through lockdown (i.e. the Ellen DeGeneres story) or, more significantly, reporting on class and ethnic disparities in covid-19 death rates. Maybe, with the groundwork already laid down by reporting on the structural inequities exposed by natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina or on the diverse impacts of the GFC, now in light of covid-19, class will become a more familiar rubric of popular media analysis? Or am I being too hopeful here?

**Day 21/April 15: walking**

One way I have been getting through this lockdown thus far has been through (extensive) daily walking. Now on our second day of rain and with a forecast of strong winds putting this on hold, it seems fitting to reflect on what walking might mean not just a form of (currently legally sanctioned) exercise, but a way of supporting mental wellbeing, awakening spiritual and emotional awareness, and a means (and for some of us, a vital one) of engaging with the world.

I walk when I am happy and when I am sad. I’ve been known to take off for an hour or two of walking when I am angry or even just emotionally or mentally lost and in need of finding direction. There is something about the steady movement, one foot after another, that so clearly contravenes the feeling that I am stuck, mired in unhappiness or indecision, and replaces it with the acutely powerful sense of having accomplished something significant through the most basic activities of propelling my legs, my body and thus myself in one direction or another.

No matter how bad is my sense of the situation I am in when I start off, walking clarifies my thoughts and reveals things that were obvious but just outside of my reach. Each footstep forces a shift in perspective. Losing myself in movement (re)connects me with the earth, as well as with a particular city or neighbourhood, with other people, and with the natural landscape around me. Nowadays when time seems suspended and it is hard to remember which day of the week it is, much less where we are in the year, in the academic calendar, or in the crisis -- and sitting back in contemplation feels so dangerous as it merely reminds one of the horrors so many around the world are experiencing -- walking anchors me to the (seemingly timeless, yet, for each of us, time-bound) world, giving me the freedom to explore the surprise of the next vista, while also imbuing me with a sense of anchorage.

No matter how it is undertaken, walking never feels solitary. It is always about discovering oneself immersed within something bigger, a place which, whatever that place might be, is full of life. While several scholars have noted how our modes of walking connect us with specific cultures and societies (Mauss 2007[1935]; Ingold and Vergunst 2008), for me, walking always evokes a powerful sense of history, conjuring up an awareness of the thousands or millions who have walked here before me and will do so after I am gone. To stretch dance theorist Andre Lepecki’s (2004) description of the movement of dance as simultaneously constituting presence and absence, walking creates a sense emplacement while throwing into relief its ephemerality. In doing so, it presents the world as inherently imbued with possibilities, while also underscoring the importance of enacting them.

**Day 22/April 16: making bubbles[[2]](#footnote-2)**

[XXXX – BLINDED FOR REVIEW] and I have been reflecting on the (very odd) new social form of ‘bubbles.’ It seems to me that in the 48 hours we were given to prepare for lockdown, there was an assumption that, for the most part, most New Zealanders would already know who was going to be in their bubble. There was advice from government as to what to do with respect to joint custody of children, or the need to support people living in situations of domestic violence, but unless I missed it, outside of these scenarios, there seemed to be a general assumption that we would just buckle down for the next four weeks with the people we already live with. But the way this would function involves several (often incorrect) assumptions about household composition.

One fallacy that appears to surface in the lockdown regulations is the assumption that the people we live with form an economic unit. Thus the advice (regulation?) that one person from each bubble should do the grocery shopping. What about students sharing a house together or other shared tenancies? These people might live together due to the force of economic circumstance, but they do not form a ‘household’ in the traditional economic sense (they don’t share resources, much else engage in production or consumption together, outside of perhaps consuming shared utilities). In such circumstances the possibility of pooling together money to send one person to the household shop is extremely challenging, and may be just impossible to pull off.

Another fallacy is that our primary relations of care and responsibility will somehow coincide with our bubble. TV ONE is showing a repeated advert informing us to ‘love your bubble’ and is asking viewers to send in videos showing how we enact this. But as in the above example of students or workers living together, a bubble may not involve ANY relations of love, collective responsibility or care. This raises the challenge of what happens when someone in the bubble falls sick (not an unlikely possibility given there is a pandemic) and needs support or care, or someone else to make healthcare decisions on their behalf, (given that those who might normally provide this are locked in other bubbles and cannot respond appropriately)?

And, as we all know, many of us have enduring ties and obligations to those outside our bubble which are now even harder to fulfil. Some families regularly have members who traverse from one household or another, shifting domiciles based on ties of love as well as shifting care-giving responsibilities and economic needs. Even if we do happen to live in a nuclear household, we face challenges of supporting kin who live elsewhere (elderly family members, adult children who may have lost their jobs in the crisis, etc.), friends who live alone, colleagues or community members who are immuno-compromised, etc.

The regulations enabling members of one bubble to join up with another, or enabling movement of a vulnerable person into a different bubble (i.e. an elderly person living alone can now move to join another bubble), go a step forward in addressing these complexities. But given all the recent attention to supporting mental wellbeing during lockdown (which I think is a really good thing), it would seem useful to add to these discussions greater recognition of the diverse patterns of co-habitation we engage in – namely, that those who cohabitate together do not necessarily equal a household, that a household does not necessarily equal a family, and that the ties of care, love, and obligation many of us are involved in far surpass any of these delineations.

Across the nation there's been a very visible rise in domestic care activities (baking, trying out new recipes, etc.), but it remains the case that for some people, it is not a matter of ‘making home better’ - their sense of belonging or ‘at home-ness’ may not coincide at all with the residence in which they must currently ‘stay home’ and live out a period of great stress and anxiety. For others, the choices made in those 48 hours were not easy and will have enduring (and sometimes unanticipated) consequences.

**Day 23/April 17: waiting**

For a while, I was obsessively following the news with rapt attention. It felt like things were constantly moving. There was the day just before we went into lockdown, when I finished teaching and went straight to the car park and on our drive home from the university, my daughter Anika asked me what I made of the latest news, and I found myself apologetically replying that I was behind, explaining that I’d been teaching for 2 hours and thus didn’t know the latest -- and then I realised how ridiculous such a statement would have been in other times, other situations. For a while, whenever I woke up in the middle of the night (inevitably feeling anxious), I’d whip out my phone to see what the US and UK news feeds were running.

Now it feels like the numbers are all blurring together. How many dead? How many recovered? I realise this is by virtue of my privileged position of being able to feel disassociated from the figures. If one of those numbers represented someone I knew, it would have a completely different meaning. But instead not only has living through the crisis come to have its own little rituals (wake up, check the news, make coffee, check the news again, do some work, check the news again) but they have begun to blur together so that it is hard to separate yesterday’s ‘breaking headlines,’ yesterday’s numbers, from today’s or even last week’s (last week - that time, before Easter, when it was the same, but wasn’t). Things have started to feel stagnant, as if in my little domestic and virtual spheres of the world, life has become the act of waiting. But waiting for what? For lockdown to lift? (But it doesn’t look like NZ’s level 3 will be all that different from level 4). For the pandemic to go away (via the magic of a vaccine or otherwise)? That seems like a very long wait.

And even the waiting has changed. At the start, it was an attentive waiting, what Gillian Tan (2009:67), in her essay ‘Senses of Waiting among Tibetan Nomads,’ has described as the form of waiting that ‘reminds us of the etymological root of ‘waiting’ in French. Attente, or ‘attending’ is to direct one’s energies or mind towards something, to pay attention to, to wait for. This reveals a sense of waiting that requires our five physical senses to be attentive and interactive, the way that hunters wait for prey or mountain climbers wait for belay.’ I have never been a hunter or a mountain climber, but it reminds me of the waiting one feels the last week or two of a pregnancy – exhausted, ready for it to end, but never complacent … just in case… the action….. starts …. NOW.

Now it is more like the other form of waiting Tan (2009:66) describes: ‘waiting … associated with passivity or feeling that one is unable to move or act. When we wait, we are caught in between one action and another, in between moving from one state of being to another. What is more, we are often not in control of our movements but are subject to another will.’

But must such passive waiting necessarily be non-agentive, experienced as out of our control, or does this not require assuming a particularly Western (masculinist, ego-centric) view of what ‘control’ entails? Can it not be a very agentive act to embrace or even cultivate within oneself passivity?

Maybe there is a third kind of waiting, not alert, attentive, interactive but also not feeling ‘stuck’ or helpless, but one characterised by intentionally turning down the volume on life in order to let things wash over, until, as Veena Das (2007: 80) so beautifully puts it, through ‘the *work* of time,’ the situation becomes a very different one and we find ourselves able to act again.

**Day 24/ April 18: ‘the crisis imaginary’**

For the first time during this crisis, the government seems seriously out of step with the general public. Yesterday, the government gave a detailed description of the regulations for Level 3, whilst repeatedly warning that there are no assurances that when we get to the end of the 4 week lockdown (next Wed), we will actually transition down to Level 3. The announcements describing Level 3 were, we were told, intended to ‘allow businesses to prepare’ for the eventual transition to a lower level, but they were accompanied by strong warnings that the general public should not become complacent, as well as repeated reminders that level 4 regulations currently remain in effect.

But -- in a predominantly democratic, non-police state like NZ -- the Level 4 restrictions only work as a form of collective widespread risk management if the general public sees them as valid and meaningful. The very terms ‘crisis’ (as Janet Roitman (2013) points out in her analysis of the rhetorical force behind various elements in the ‘crisis imaginary’), ‘state of emergency,’ and, increasingly in NZ, ‘Level 4,’ have a performative force. Once the risk starts to look as if it is receding, the directives put in place to mitigate it will obviously lose such force. Trying to pretend otherwise threatens pitting the government and the public against one another – a bad idea in an election year, and an especially bad idea when there may be more anti-covid-19 measures that we will need to collectively, willingly undertake in the near future. It also re-instates some very old stereotypes of rational, forward-thinking states (interestingly in this case, in partnership with rational forward-thinking businesses) versus an emotional, irrational citizenry (portrayed as quick to be swept up by the desire to drop all the restrictions that have been put in place to keep covid-19 in check) who are thus in need of being governed by the State, rather than being those who grant power to the State.

It didn’t help that in describing Level 3, the government’s metaphors seemed to be stretched to breaking point. Finance Minister Grant Robertson told us we can’t stop now, as we are engaged in running ‘a marathon, not a short sprint,’ – surely by day 2 or 3 it was pretty evident that this was never going to be a sprint? Marathons also tend to have an endpoint that you know in advance, not one that might be extended. Education Minister Chris Hipkins gave a hilarious explanation of how having children of essential workers back at school will not entail breaking their respective bubbles as they will form of a ‘new bubble’ that incorporates all their classmates (and then when all 20 of them go home for the day, do they bring their school bubble-mates with them?)

Today, when it finally stopped raining, we – and it seems, all of the rest of West Auckland – emerged out of the house to find the parks and beaches teeming with people. Based on the numbers of cars in the car park, there were many more people who drove to the beach, stretching the meaning of ‘local travel,’ holding picnics or sunbathing (not seen as yet, during level 4), or obviously chatting with others who are ‘not in their bubble’ given their attentiveness to keeping 2 meters apart (also not generally seen during level 4).

Everywhere we passed there seemed to be an air of excited anticipation - and subsequently, and not unexpectedly, a loosening of attentiveness to level 4 restrictions. No matter how government tries to pitch it, in response to the news that there may very well be a visible light at the end of the tunnel, the public has shifted its future orientation. We may still be caught in a ‘crisis imaginary,’ but we have come back to a much broader framing of the future, After all, the ‘anticipatory self’ includes not just the deflection of risk but what Adams, Murphy and Clarke (2009:247) describe as ‘an excited forward looking subjective condition characterized as much by nervous anxiety as a continual refreshing of yearning...’ After over 3 weeks of what the government itself has characterised as ‘sacrifice’ being replaced now by a detailed, colour-coded chart or ‘dashboard’ of all the characteristics of Level 3, it is difficult to see how government can expect Level 4 to continue to be self-enforced.

Potentially even more problematic, however, will be the enforcement of Level 3 regulations, particularly as there seem to be some odd discrepancies in what will or will not be permissible. Swimming will be ok, but not hunting or taking a boat out to go fishing (never mind that for some economically marginalised people, particularly in Māori, Asian, and Pacific communities, hunting and fishing are a form of food provision, rather than being viewed as sport or entertainment). Takeaways will be open as will schools for children of essential service workers, but families are reminded to keep children away from the elderly (never mind that many Pacific, Māori and Asian families, as well as quite a few Pākehā ones, live in multi-generational households). Funerals will be ok, but only 10 people will be allowed to attend (so no large extended families, which again has significant cultural implications). If the government wants to keep the sense of all of us ‘being in this together,’ it might be worthwhile to include some more cultural advisors or even a few anthropologists among their advisory team.

**Day 25/ April 19: movement**

Yesterday’s news reports rising numbers of New Zealanders exercising (walking, running, biking, etc.), with reporters speculating that the motivation is that under Level 4, exercise is a valid excuse to leave home. This may be one factor, but it doesn’t explain the surge of interest in yoga at, or the numbers of people running marathons on balconies, or, like the members of the Mikhailovsky theatre company, staging ballets in their kitchens (Rosenberg 2020). So while some of the rise in exercise may be attributable to wanting to leave the house, as well as, most likely, the desire to stay fit and/or boost one's immunity in the face of a pandemic, another facet may very well be the human desire (or perhaps, vital need) to move.

As the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka highlighted, we are not only embodied beings, but constantly moving ones. For Patočka, any approach to understanding our being-in-the-world requires attentiveness to movement.

I have been attempting to apply Patočka’s work on movement, as well as Heidegger's broader insights on phenomenology, to ethnography through the concept of traversing -- or the variety of ways of seeing, experiencing, and moving through the world that we engage in and the kinds of persons we become through them.

Traversing focuses on movement as an embodied practice, highlighting the significance of spatiality (our being in a world of objects and spaces that determine our movements) and temporality (considering how movement varies across various moments in the body’s life course, such as childhood, youth, adulthood, and old age). It also foregrounds inter-relationality, as movement is fundamentally about moving with, against, or alongside others. The very possibility (or impossibility) of movement has a decided social and political edge, as we see so clearly around the world today. Movement is thus highly individual while also inter-relational and shaped by collective and structural opportunities and constraints.

There many ways to consider how traversing has changed during lockdown and obviously, for each of us, what's changed depends on our geographic situatedness as well as who we are (in terms of ethnicity, gender, class, and age). But outside of completely recasting our abilities to move from one place to another, perhaps more importantly, are the ways that the crisis has profoundly reshaped, and will continue to reshape, our movements in relation to others, be it through new fears of physical intimacy, proximity, sexual contact, or simply breathing the same air. There is now immense emphases put on ‘connecting’ via digital technologies which are certainly marvellous at enabling some level of communication but not only hinder our innate abilities to derive a feel for a situation, but radically recast our physical – and thus affective and conceptual - perspectives in ways I think we have yet to understand.

Patočka suggested that our perspective, and thus our grasp, of a situation is always linked to our bodily interaction with a thing or a space. That is, to see a situation, I must already be somewhere within it: ‘… perspective always extends out from a center constituted by a perceptually incomplete appearance of our own corporeity. … A situation is something in which I must be in order to understand it (not above or before it) ….’ (Patočka 1989 [1967]: 254).

I wonder what he would make of how much time we spend nowadays ‘in’ situations that, via digital technologies, are so widely refracted across space (and sometimes time, e.g. when there is an audio lag), that we feel simultaneously inside and yet also outside – there but not quite there.

What has happened to the power of ‘being there,’ (Geertz 1988; Borneman and Hammoudi 2009) if none of us can actually get there, or, more precisely, there is no ‘there’ to get to – no collectively constituted space of affective, physical, embodied inter-relationality?

**Day 26/April 20: surveillance**

Level 4 Lockdown has been extended by a few extra days (and will then be followed by at least 2 weeks at Level 3), so it feels like, as far as NZ is concerned, social distancing, school closures, working from home, etc. is all going to carry on for some time. As part of the planned move to Level 3, the government is highlighting a new national-level ‘contact tracing system’ (with the PM noting she has been surprised with respect to current covid-19 contact tracing by the extent of national mobility and stressing the importance of tracking all of our movements (Anonymous 2020c).

Having spent the day catching up on the new (and old) scholarly literature on states of emergency which basically portrays states of emergency as an excuse for extending state power (e.g. Fassin and Pandolfi (2010) suggesting we need to approach states of emergency by considering ‘the false assumptions that generally underlie them … in order to comprehend what such mobilizations leave unspoken or deliberately hide, to grasp their ambiguities and contradictions, to understand the bases of them and the stakes involved…’), I am both aware of the very real need of public health officials to know who we’ve been in contact with and appalled at the thought of having to present government with a complete list of where I’ve been and who I’ve been in contact with.

I’m also extremely curious as to the questions and methods public servants will use to conduct contact tracing – I assume our mobile phone trackers will be part of it, but what else? Our own oral reports? Or also those of others? (and what would the implications of that be - as the child of Eastern European immigrants, the idea of informing on the movements of neighbours looms large. Imagine a world not only struggling with fears of ‘others’ due to possible contagion but also concerns over being dobbed in over where we go, who we choose to see...)

I also imagine that as we shift into Level 3, the temptations to ‘stretch’ lockdown regulations will be more difficult to resist (e.g. walking on the golf course, despite it being signposted as closed to the public; engaging in ‘regional travel’ only? doesn’t that include driving from Auckland to Wellington?). How will this shape the facts -- and fictions -- of contact tracing?

**Day 27/April 21: unlearning self-knowledge**

One thing that’s been mentioned a lot in the news is that people are avoiding using healthcare services (for non-covid-19 related issues). At the same time, there are a lot of tips circulating on how to engage in mental and physical self-care, particularly (but not exclusively) aimed at young people. (e.g. Orygen 2020). But just at the same time that the lockdown encourages us to be more reliant on self-care, the nature of the pandemic along with the ways it has been reported, seem to be throwing off (at least some) young people’s confidence in their bodily self-knowledge.

I have been running a research project on how young people use digital tech for health purposes. Pre-covid-19, a number of young people described the processes they went through in order to learn how to engage in self-care appropriately, with several recounting they initially found themselves leaning towards hypochondria, getting intensely frightened when they first started to Google their symptoms. (For example, examining each headache for signs of a brain tumour, with an 18 year old woman repeatedly heading to the university health service to demand an MRI until she was told she has to stop).

Many said it took a while for them to learn how to discriminate what sort of online info was likely to be both accurate and relevant to them, recounting how they learned to disregard info that seems too alarmist, with the often repeated example being learning to ignore online health info that indicated they were likely to have cancer. (In addition to the woman who feared brain cancer, another strikingly sad exception was a 20 year old man whose father had been unwell, googled his symptoms, didn’t believe it could be lung cancer, and then went to the GP too late, who kept repeating that the worst case scenario can't be ignored just because it seems too dire).

At the same time, they also spoke of learning how to interpret their bodies more accurately, recognising (via their interactions with online info, and often the way what they read online was differently interpreted by themselves, their friends, siblings, parents, and their healthcare providers), what is ok (for them), and what is not. As one young man put it, once he had some experience knowing his body, he could identify which symptoms are worrisome. Two young men (ages 19 and 24) spoke about their pain thresholds being the key factor that determines if they go to a GP or not.

So far, the (admittedly as yet limited) interviews we’ve done during the covid-19 pandemic reveal that these abilities to self-assess are increasingly felt to be under threat, in part because the symptoms of covid-19 are so similar to colds and flu (a 19 year old woman said: ‘it’s a struggle [to stay calm about her health] especially now that there's the covid-19 thing. It's like, yeah, so I don't know, if it's just a cough or if it's, I don't know where to draw the line’) but also because many thought the initial reporting was too alarmist. Another young woman (24) said when she first heard about it, she ‘panicked’’ (‘Because you hear ‘epidemic,’ and you’re like, ‘oh my God, it’s everywhere.’’) and then, like the cancer diagnosis, determined the fears of a global epidemic were alarmist and inaccurate, only to later have to completely reassess this.

I imagine many of us, of all ages, are going through similar processes of uncertainty (which is part of what makes the crisis a crisis), but given that this seems to be a common learning process in young adulthood in which digital technologies are playing a major role, it will be interesting to see how living through a pandemic might perhaps reshape not only their assessments of digital information but also how they come to initially establish their internal sense of what is going on with their bodies.

**Day 28/April 22: self-transcendence**

I find myself returning to the work of Jan Patočka (1989 [1967]) who conceptualised life as lived across three registers (or ‘movements,’ as he put it): 1) the sinking of roots or the building of familial ties; 2) self-projection through the world of work; and 3) self-transcendence, or moving beyond the particulars of our place and time in the world to embrace the universe itself.

The lockdown has forced us to transform our activities across all three, compelling us to grapple much more intensely with intimate relationships and domestic dynamics; injecting the world of work (or absence of work) with often dramatic feelings of insecurity, anxiety and anger, as well as acts of intense goodwill towards one another (I don’t know how many email communications I have now had with distant colleagues where the opening line of ‘I hope you are doing ok,’ ends up instigating previously unheard of intimate exchanges about how we are actually doing); recasting the balance between nature and built environments while throwing into relief, yet again, just how deeply the world is interconnected.

I was initially opposed to the language of a ‘new normal’ as I wanted to hold onto what felt like the radical abnormality of this situation – i.e. the crisis as a crisis. While I agree that the word ‘crisis’ is often over-used, for me, it captures the unique scale and depths of devastation, evoking both the affective power and the need to act in the midst of these events. Reinhart Koselleck, in his overview of the historical uses of the concept of ‘crisis,’ suggests that part of its power is that it connotes both a turning point/the end of an epoch, as well as ‘a state of greater or lesser permanence, as in a longer or shorter transition towards something better or worse or towards something altogether different’ (2006:358). Koselleck thus posits understandings of ‘crisis’ as we now know it, as the starting point of modernity, in that the term gained traction in the mid or late 18th C. when history came to be seen as necessarily unknown and open-ended (as opposed to grounded in constant principals such as the relation between ‘God and man.’)

The roots of the term stem much further back, and Koselleck underscores several shifts in its usage across European history, including how in its first known usage in classical Greece, crisis (*krísis*) referred to both an upheaval and a moment of judgment, assessment, or critique: ‘it meant not only ‘divorce’ or ‘quarrel,’ but also ‘decision’ in the sense of reaching a crucial point that would tip the scales’ (2006:358).

The current crisis seems to fulfil both sides of the coin. With global food shortages looming, we could be on the verge of even more massive global devastation. But there has also been an increased awareness of how environmental damage is tearing apart our health – indeed, a recent story by the Guardian proposed that air pollution (specifically NO2) might be a key factor determining higher death rates from covid-19. At the same time, a second Guardian story focused on how a dramatic drop in air pollution in Milan during the lockdown has resulted in moves to restrict future car emissions by transforming city streets into walkways and cycle ways Laker 2020).

A crisis in the true sense of not only crisis but critique, I am hopeful that perhaps, just perhaps, the pandemic may possibly prove to be a ‘tipping point’ in terms of how we recognise and relate to our planet.

**Day 30/April 24: ‘not hungry’**

Up until a few weeks ago, there were programmes distributing free food, including free lunches for those in need, to kids through schools. But not everyone who was eligible for such food ate it. In her beautifully-written, ethnographic examination of the lives of primary school children in a low decile, South Auckland school, Julie Spray analysed children’s embodied dispositions and associated discourse of being ‘not hungry,’ suggesting how for many of them, ‘lunch means more than sustenance; it is also a highly visible symbol of socioeconomic status and of a parent who is giving care as parents should. Because the spare lunches require special—and public— request, this well-intended charity service marks out children who have unfulfilled needs, establishing the idea that lunches are not meant to be supplied by the school. Lunches are meant to be supplied by parents’ (2020:103).

Spray goes on to explicate the connections between children's discourses and embodiments of ‘not hungry’: ‘Instead of risking being seen as scabbers, children may cultivate a bodily practice of “not hungry,” which in itself conditions those children to be less tuned in to hunger signals, and may instead focus attention onto other perceptions—a practice that accrues over time into an embodied habitus of “not hungry”’ (2020:133).

The UN is warning of a global famine (‘of biblical proportions’). Here in NZ, with schools closed, some of the school meal programmes have been diverted to home delivery, but need for food is still skyrocketing. In Wellington and Palmerston North, distribution of free food parcels has gone up by 900%. (That is not a typo – it is the number announced on the TV news and on Radio NZ (e.g. Robson 2020). This is a stark figure, not just in terms of who is hungry, but also those who are ‘not hungry.’

**Day 31/April 25 (ANZAC Day)**: r**itual**

First there were teddy bears in windows, then sprawling, coloured chalk Easter eggs drawn across fences and sidewalks. Now bright, red and black ANZAC poppies adorn several of the houses on our street. Some are paper cut outs with semi-filled in crayon scribbles, while others are more intricate cloth or metal creations.

When I first moved to NZ, I was surprised by the widespread levels of public engagement in ANZAC day, particularly the ways that people from a very broad range of political persuasions actively commemorated those who died during warfare. Death during warfare is charged with a different political meaning in a society that has strong welfare provisions and minimal international military engagement. Interestingly, the past two decades have witnessed a groundswell in popular participation in ANZAC day in ways that rival the nation’s national day, Waitangi Day, which commemorates the signing of the Waitangi Treaty between Māori and the British Crown, and has become increasingly politically charged.

This year’s ANZAC day feels even more significant, as in lieu of mass gatherings at the dawn service, at dawn people stood up in their houses, in their gardens, or at their mailboxes along the sides of the road – symbolically together, while keeping their distance. I'm used to thinking of ritual in terms of collective embodiment (Turner's (1967) liminality, or Daniel's (1987) transformation via pain), but this is much more about the symbolic display or spectacle. Hardly anyone in my neighbourhood knows each other, in the sense of knowing each other’s names, families, or life stories. But through the making and displaying of poppies, there is a very visible collective enactment of ‘belonging’ that one only needs to walk up and down the street to witness – just as there was at Easter, or when the bears first went up on display. I am struck again by people’s palpable desire to demonstrate that --despite our face-to-face interactions being, for the most part, restricted to our own bubbles -- they are a part of, and *want* to be a part of, something broader, be it Nation or Community/ies (however they be imagined).

**Day 33/27 April, Last Day at the (Current) Level 4: critique**

Someone has forwarded to me Ghassan Hage’s (public) Facebook post promoting the first page of his new essay, ‘The Haunting Figure of the Useless Academic: Critical Thinking in Coronavirus Time.’ It starts off with the line: ‘I like to imagine that many intellectuals would agree that the last thing one needs during a pandemic are intellectuals, let alone “critical” intellectuals’ (Hage 2020). I am not sure I would count myself among these. Is it not the role of the academic to act as ‘critic and conscience of society’? And isn’t a time of crisis precisely the time when debate, particularly debate informed by scholarship, is most necessary?

In *Thinking in an Emergency*, Elaine Scarry (2011) argues that states of emergency must not preclude public critique. Rather, according to Scarry (2011:3), we must stay wary of the ‘seduction to stop thinking,’ particularly given that crises may be ongoing rather than short-lived (and states of emergencies may thus be chronic), it is imperative to sustain democratic debate. Indeed, she suggests it is one of the responsibilities of citizenship to engage in how best to protect one another, both within and beyond national boundaries. In a similar vein, democratic theorist Bonnie Honig (2009) suggests that even during states of emergency, sovereignty ultimately resides with the people.

If, as Honig (2009: 3) draws from Arendt, Wittgenstein, and others, ‘democratic sovereignty … [is] …. plural and contingent… a constellation of contending forces,’ then even in times of crises, there will necessarily be a plurality of voices.

This is comforting, and makes me reconsider my initial distress over protests against ‘stay-home’ measures in societies as diverse as the US and Germany. I certainly do not support them, but I realise I need to support their right to contest, even if I strongly disagree with their methods of doing so. Considering the US and its current presidency, clearly we need to hold onto consensus-building forms of decision making -- especially in times of crisis -- rather than embracing top-down measures (or we may just all end up following President Trumps’ latest provocation and inhaling bleach). As New Zealand shifts tomorrow into Level 3 and the criticisms and debates over how best to move forward from here on intensify, it is crucial to embrace the cacophony of voices over how, when, and if to move forward as strong sign of how even in a state of emergency, democratic debate is essential.

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1. The ideas initially outlined in this post developed into a more theoretical piece, urging for a reconceptualisation of citizen-state relations during ‘states of emergency’ (BLINDED FOR REVIEW 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For more detail, see BLINDED FOR REVIEW (2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)