

RE-CONSTRUCTING BELONGING:  
A COMMUNITY RESPONSE TO COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

*This paper explores the impact of COVID-19 on belonging in a provincial Aotearoa-New Zealand town during lockdown. Drawing on the observation of suburban neighbourhood practices, it is grounded in qualitative methods and uses the metaphors of rhizome and web to understand and describe belonging.*

*The advent of COVID-19 and subsequent political directives led to the 2020 lockdown, precipitating changes observed variously through inscription, inter/action within built and natural environments, embodiment, emplacement and movement, and/or gained through shared and/or common experiences.*

*This paper concludes that changes observed in practices demonstrated the impact of COVID-19 and lockdown on neighbourhood belonging. The prolonged period of closely-bounded containment led people to re/create, expand, deepen or maintain not only local but also national and global belonging.*

**Keywords:** belonging, neighbourhood, COVID-19, lockdown, visual anthropology.

SETTING THE SCENE

A wave of immense sadness swept over me as I left our offices today. The clock chimed 12 noon as I opened the car door. I turned to my colleague and we said our farewells. I wanted to cry. We couldn't hug; we were almost in lockdown.<sup>2</sup> We were, like the rest of the country, of the world, trying to keep ourselves safe. It was like leaving on a jet plane or a train – certainly on a long journey to another country – a country unknown as yet but which would reveal itself over the next four weeks.<sup>3</sup> One of those partings that is not filled with hope, excitement, anticipation of the next stage on the journey, but of over-

whelming loss. This lovely woman, the other wonderful colleagues I have worked with for periods ranging from six months to 11 years, are all firmly entrenched in my heart.

One might argue that we only work together. So why these emotions? Because they are also my good friends and, after the COVID-19 lockdown is lifted, who knows what the world will look like. A friend sent a message asking how we were. She has chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and was in self-isolation not because she had had contact with anyone with the virus, but because it was the only way she could keep herself safe with her compromised health: 'I feel as if I am never going to see any of the people I love again. Morbid, I know, but that's how it seems.'

COVID-19, a coronavirus reportedly originating in Wuhan, China,<sup>4</sup> came to the world's attention early in 2020 as people began to drop like flies, and, with international travel, spread rapidly throughout the world. I and other New Zealanders watched with trepidation as the threat came closer; as travellers were flown out from China and quarantined in Auckland; as loved ones continued travelling home for celebrations and returned to work as borders were closed and self-isolation was imposed on travellers.

We had five family members fly in from Australia: one had been working in Perth and lived in New Zealand; the others were based in Melbourne. They joined us for a weekend to celebrate their dad and granddad's 70th birthday party, planned months ahead – one returned to his Australian home with two hours to go before he would have been required to self-isolate. He worked for a day-and-a-half, after which his employers asked everyone possible to work from home. His brother arrived back in Australia three days after the cut-off and went immediately into self-isolation.

As their mother, I am relieved they are in the same city and can support one another. One has been taking comfort packages to brother and keeping to himself the rest of the time. 'He's a real blessing atm,' messaged the other. Thank heavens for social media. We send photos, talk online, send messages and make video calls. It helps us feel less isolated in a situation where the world has turned upside down, gone as we know it, and unpredictable in its future – in so far as we do not know what our own personal worlds will look like, let alone

the globe. Maybe good for climate change, reduction in consumerism, development of resilience – maybe not. The fear is that loved ones might die; the changes this will wreak in our ways of being; the uncertainty of it all.

The Government announcement of a lockdown – physical isolation, closing of all non-essential businesses, calls for retired and part-time health professionals to assist – came on an overcast grey day with the temperature dropping from summer highs to morning and evening chills.

In our office, we looked at one another in confusion, wondering where to begin. We tried not to panic yet ensure we had enough supplies to avoid the supermarket if possible. Then we went home.

(Digital diary 2020)

## INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on the impact of COVID-19 on neighbourhood practices and changes in belonging, mostly during the first Alert Level 4 COVID-19 lockdown in a provincial town in Aotearoa-New Zealand. It draws particularly on observations of practices in four adjacent suburbs during those five weeks and a few days either side. The research is linked to my own personal experiences of belonging in and to two provincial New Zealand areas: childhood belonging in the north, and adult belonging further south. The former is embedded in my being geographically, environmentally and through early family connections, while the latter has developed since my arrival in this community in 1974. My connections to my immediate neighbourhood, the main location of this research, have developed and strengthened, contracted and expanded through life stages and experiences, ancestral and marital family connections, employment, raising a family and volunteering. My experiences of life here and further north are combined with my earlier research into community and belonging, and prompted this investigation into changes in local neighbourhood practices and belonging before, during and after lockdown.

While I continue to be reminded of changes wrought in society since the advent of COVID-19 and make occasional reference here, my main aims are two-fold: firstly, to provide a glimpse into what occurred in my neighbourhood and adjacent suburbs during and shortly after that first lockdown drawing on personal observation, photographs and comments from others, locally and elsewhere;

and secondly, to demonstrate how this lockdown impacted on belonging to location and community, and also connected folk to the world beyond. Firstly, I present my perspective on belonging with reference to various theorists; secondly, I outline events leading up to lockdown with reference to earlier freedoms; thirdly, I record the research rationale and methodology; fourthly, I present my observations with comment and analysis; and finally, referencing the rhizome and the web as metaphors for connection and belonging, I conclude that lockdown changed practices and impacted on belonging in one provincial neighbourhood and its environs.

## BELONGING

My approach to belonging draws on Feld and Basso (1996), Ingold (2000, 2010) Massey (1991, 1992, 1994) and Tuan (1974, 1977) in terms of place and space, with particular awareness of Feld and Basso's (1996) concept of place as socially and physically constrained. Given that lockdown imposed social, physical and temporal boundaries defined by government directives, including place of residence, type of employment, age and health status, I assert that lockdown created a liminal space – an in-between space – outside our usual social experience (Turner 1983; van Gennep in Chicago School of Media Theory 2021). The entry threshold for Aotearoa-New Zealanders was midnight on 25 March and emerged when Alert Level 4 was reduced to Alert Level 3. Entering lockdown was akin to leaving the world as we knew it, uncertain of what it would be when we re-entered the world, and, upon re-entry, discovering that it was the same yet different, with certain collective responses engendering *communitas*; that sense of being together as one (Turner 1983).

Bourdieu's (1982) concept of practice enables an understanding of the role of individual agency and its interplay with social habitus and the environment in making and observing belonging. It allows a way of viewing individual actions and their connections to the collective, and how their response to political directives and engagement with the collective enhances social capital.

Working with these parameters, I draw on Deleuze and Guatarri's (1987) concept of the rhizome as a metaphor for belonging, twinned with Geertz's (1973) concept of 'webs of significance'. I assert that one's Sense of Belonging is multi-faceted, multi-layered, fluid and mutable, dense, thick, extensive, fibrous, visible and hidden all at once, like a rhizome, such as the bearded iris, the ginger plant or the tuberous potato: 'A rhizome is not static, and nor is belonging' (Robinson 2005, 216) but may present differently according to location. Belonging has 'no beginning or end: it is always in the middle...coming and going rather than

starting and finishing' (Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 6–7).

This metaphor provides a way of envisaging belonging as layered, its connections every which way – up, down, sideways, diagonal, thick, thin, infinite, tiny, large, variable, malleable, changeable – the rhizome a substantial physical object with which to comprehend this complexity. Like most plants, how rhizomes fare and/or evolve depends on their genetic makeup, environment, nutrition, soil type, climate, rainfall, location and nurture. The solid nature of a rhizome, with multiple nodes (growth points), means it can be divided or broken and transplanted elsewhere. There it may flourish or diminish, depending on the environment, just as belonging can and does according to circumstances and effort (Robinson 2005).

Belonging is a complex combination of individual and collective actions, practices, cultural codes and personal and collective philosophies...multiple, mutable, fluid and layered, personal and collective, positive and negative, embedded and elective, proscribed, ascribed, accepted and/or rejected... impacted on and altered by personal agency, political processes and global events...enhanced by knowledge of common experiences and shared practices...

(Robinson 2000, 215)

However, the metaphor of the rhizome seemed insufficient, requiring something to render belonging more clearly across distance. Twinning this with another metaphor, Geertz's (1973) concept of 'webs of significance', aids in conceptualising how belonging can exist globally: not transplanted, but connected through common or shared experiences. The notion of the web, a complex form requiring aerial construction and regular re/creation or repair, adds a lightness and light not evident in the rhizome. Strong, stretchy, sticky yet easily broken and re/created regularly and not always easy to see, the web's filaments and the spaces between are rendered more visible by water droplets or sunlight. For me, these filaments, their elasticity and the spaces between, offer a way to understand how connections can exist across distance, the threads fine, almost invisible, but anchored by shared or common experiences nationally and globally.

We create belonging variously – socially, culturally, ethnically, religiously, spiritually, environmentally – with the practices of belonging observable in movement through the landscape (Ingold 2010), in origin stories, common experiences and shared values, as embodiment and emplacement, engagement in place and space, inscription,<sup>5</sup> and collective action and in codes of caring. In my

experience, belonging can comprise of all these aspects, some more apparent than others, but always interwoven, just as the rhizome sits below ground as a solid, fibrous mass where roots delve into the earth for sustenance while above ground the rhizome offers leaves, flowers and seeds, providing homes, hiding places and sustenance for small creatures. Like rhizomatic plants, belonging can be absent, not apparent, or smothered, but, with judicious effort, revived, recovered or grown, while the web enables us to visualise our own connections, recognising how strong, tenuous, fragile or in need of care it might be.

Metaphorically, the need for nurturing and/or repair was brought home to me early in lockdown as I weeded my iris bed (Figure 1a and 1b), and later when I discovered iris, planted too deeply in wet soil, rotting. I had paid little attention to the area for eight months or more and, as I threaded my way through and around the iris, the tangle of grass, the scramble of weeds, the desiccated lanky leaves of the iris, gave me pause and I thought,

To belong we have to make an effort – not just in subtle ways, but in conscious ways. Belonging must be tended, maintained, worked at, just as a garden is worked at. Belonging can be grown, relocated, weakened by neglect, smothered, or even die. Like a rhizome, belonging can present differently in different locations.

(Digital diary)

I noted then that, despite neglect, most of the rhizomes were strong despite the presence of dead and dying leaves. The rhizomes had survived, but would flourish with attention. Some had rotted, but could be replaced. I later learned that spiders may eat their webs, using the ingested protein to make more, and



Figure 1 (a & b).

that the web must be repaired or renewed daily. 'Might belonging be the same?' I pondered, continuing with this question in mind.

#### METHODOLOGY

Partly auto-ethnographic, partly visual and partly participant-observation, this paper is grounded in previous research (Robinson 2005), in contemporary observations of neighbourhood, drawn from my own photographs, extracts from my digital diary, comments from friends and family via social media, internet and telephone contact, and news media reports. Concentrated observation and recording ran from early March to mid-May – from a few days before the first lockdown in Aotearoa-New Zealand to a few days after the nation first entered Level Three. Daily I observed my neighbourhood as I walked and cycled – Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) 'coming and going' and Ingold's (2010) 'walking and breathing and knowing' – near my home, alone or with company, always physically distanced. Other information and observations came from three adjacent suburbs – about 7 km in three directions. Friends, family and Facebook contacts provided additional information in response to a series of questions I posed. Their replies came via telephone, text message and social media from throughout the country, from large cities (Auckland, Christchurch, Wellington, Dunedin) to small towns (Whanganui, Palmerston North, the Kapiti Coast and Kerikeri), and from urban and rural dwellers. I still live in the same neighbourhood and include occasional comments about neighbourhood changes, which were noted in the past year.

#### LIFE BEFORE COVID-19

Before COVID-19 hit the world, life was relatively tranquil for many of us.

We had inestimable freedoms. We could travel; congregate in public places; celebrate festivals of all kinds; visit playgrounds – indoors and out – conservation areas and forests, and that place beloved of many Kiwis: the beach. We hung out in restaurants, cafés and our homes with friends and family. We holidayed. We participated in workshops; visited garden centres; attended conferences; enjoyed visits to libraries, museums, art galleries; played sports; trained in gyms; and engaged in a host of other activities. We could be close physically, greet one another with a hug, a handshake or a kiss.

(Digital diary, March 2020)

Those privileges left our lives within the space of days when Aotearoa-New Zealand's Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, announced that COVID-19 was a very real danger and the nation's people – often referred to as 'The Team of Five Million' (One News 2020) – would have their taken-for-granted freedoms limited and enter lockdown from midnight on 25th March 2020 (Ardern 2020a). Only supermarkets, pharmacies and essential services were permitted to operate. As a nation, we could exercise outdoors provided we kept to our neighbourhoods. Borders closed to all non-residents on 19 March, and returning citizens and residents had to self-isolate (Table 1).

Table 1. *Taken from Strongman (2020) COVID-19 Pandemic Timeline – How the Corona Virus started, spread and stalled life in New Zealand.*

08 Feb.	First reported case of COVID-19 in Aotearoa-New Zealand.
11 March	World Health Organisation declares an official pandemic.
14 March	Self-isolation for anyone entering the country except the Pacific.
17 March	Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern urges 'Be strong, Be kind. We will be Ok.'
19 March	Borders closed to all but NZ citizens and permanent residents.
21 March	Government introduces 4-level Alert system to help combat COVID-19. Country at Level Two.
23 March	Country moves into Level Three.
25 March	State of emergency declared and country prepares for lockdown from midnight for at least four weeks.
26 March	Day One of lockdown.
20 April	Lockdown to continue for an additional five days to 11.59 on 27 April.
28 April	Aotearoa-New Zealand moves into Alert Level Three.
14 May	Aotearoa-New Zealand moves into Alert Level Two.
09 June	Aotearoa-New Zealand moves into Alert Level One. Restrictions lifted on work, schools, sports, domestic travel and gathering size. Border controls continue – mandatory 14 days managed quarantine isolation measures continue.

Kiwis nationwide had tough decisions to make. No longer could most of us tread our usual pathways and engage in our usual places and ways of belonging. We, in my office, were no different. As non-essential workers, we arranged to work from home. With computers gone, the desks were strangely empty, while, at home, we set up workspaces, creating new who knows how temporary places to read and engage in

(Digital diary; Figures 1c and 1d).





Figure 1 (c & d).

Prior to the Prime Minister's announcement, I, like many others, had been observing local, national and international reactions to the news of a hitherto unknown coronavirus. Identified late in 2019, the virus was, by 30 January 2020, causing international concern. The World Health Organisation Emergency Committee declared a 'Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC)' and, three weeks later, Italy's northern provinces, Lombardy and Veneto, were locked down. On 11 March, the WHO named the emergency a pandemic (Strongman 2020).

Then came reports of Italians singing collectively from their balconies to uplift their own and their neighbours' spirits (Locker and Hoffman 2020). A week into the Aotearoa-New Zealand lockdown in 2021, we learned that the Italian mood had changed. No longer upbeat but depressed, residents had come to understand how dire the situation was. They realised its impact on life, livelihood and well-being (Guiffrida and Tondo 2020).

This response was predictable as former Aotearoa-New Zealand-based probation officer and home detention specialist, Trisha Waugh, had indicated, likening lockdown to home detention. Waugh (2020) warned that people were likely to respond similarly over the first four weeks of confinement: the first two weeks are 'a bit of a novelty', but by week three, 'acute isolation depression' may be apparent. From week four, people become more accepting, adapting to restrictions and becoming more settled.

Given the exhortations from Government, family and friends to 'Stay home, stay local, stay safe', feeling unsettled and aware of the Italian response, I asked the following questions 'What changes might be observed during lockdown? How would we respond to being confined, physically distanced, our daily patterns changed overnight? Might we respond as Italy had done?' Four weeks

into lockdown, I raised further questions via social media and in person asking, 'What do you notice that's different about your neighbourhood during lockdown? What has changed over the four-plus weeks? What has been difficult?'

#### OBSERVATIONS OF CHANGE: PRACTICES

##### *Confinement*

When lockdown began in that late March autumn of 2020, the weather was fine, sunny and warm, with fluffy white clouds floating in blue skies. For the following fortnight, folk in the neighbourhood and elsewhere in Aotearoa-New Zealand seemed upbeat, just as Waugh (2020) had predicted. People said the fine weather made it easier to adjust to containment. Bright clear days buoyed their spirits, and folk spent time outside rather than indoors. The neighbourhood atmosphere was relaxed, holiday-like. Gone were the pressures of preparing for lockdown. It was also too early for people to comprehend or appreciate the possible adverse financial, social and mental health impacts of such confinement. This was reflected in social media responses to questions as a Whanganui woman, 40s, wrote,

I was contemplating (the atmosphere) yesterday as I lay on my bed, windows open, soaking up the sun. My street has the same feeling as a camping ground...the collective energy is way less frenetic than usual. We're all camping.

Said another, also in her 40s, 'I could see a difference after one week. Sort of like a small-town Sunday afternoon,' while another, in her 60s, remarked, 'It feels like a holiday, the one you have at home.' Reflecting later on their initial lockdown experience, others made similar comments in that it 'felt more like life in the 1950s.'

Such comments indicate changes that were occurring with many people more open than pre-lockdown to interacting with others in their neighbourhoods. Greetings included 'hellos', smiles, waves and the Pacific raised brows with tilted chin. A Whanganui man in his 30s recorded, 'When you're crossing paths with other walkers, it's obvious everyone is conscious of social distancing, but, even so, people seem to be friendlier and there are lots of smiles all round.'

However, this was not so for everyone. For some, the experience engendered a sense of isolation or necessary avoidance. One woman in her 40s said,

I have noticed that, as an extension of physical distancing, I seem to have developed some sort of ‘psychological bubble’<sup>6</sup> thinking. When out on walks around our neighbourhood, I’ve found that my instinctive response is to pretend that no-one else exists – as though meeting someone’s eye or saying ‘hello’ (even from a safe distance) is breaking the lockdown rules...I think I’m not the only one, because others that I pass also seem to be avoiding eye contact. It’s quite a different vibe to ‘normal’.

Observed another woman, 60s,

It’s interesting that of the people I meet when out walking, it’s the regulars who will greet, and the dog walkers, but the ‘newbies’, i.e., people out exercising because of COVID-19 restrictions (and whom I wouldn’t normally meet) are less likely to acknowledge one’s presence. Even if greeted with a smile or ‘good morning’.

Shared experiences and shared knowledge of common experiences are aspects that enhance belonging and may be impacted by global and political experiences (Robinson 2005, 215). The reflections, comments, observations and photographs above demonstrate how folk responded to and were influenced by Government directives driven by the global pandemic experience, demonstrating how containment and restriction to an area can alter behaviours and draw communities close. Within the observed practices can be seen how time to engage with others assists in re/creating or renewing ‘webs of significance’ (Geertz 1973) by developing further webs of connection close to home.

### *Traffic and transport*

A reduction in vehicle traffic with a consequent decrease in traffic noise and the diminishing hum of a town that occurs when business is as usual became apparent within the first day or two of lockdown. Previously, motor vehicles were audible and visible on roads, day and night, but, during lockdown, they were generally only used for essential purposes like work, medical appointments and grocery shopping.

Private and trade vehicles remained stationary in yards and by kerbsides (Figure 2a). Cars clustered together no longer suggested social gatherings but folk at home (Figure 2b). Tradespeople working were those who had been granted official permission (Figures 2c,2d).



Figure 2.

With less traffic about, vehicle fumes reduced; neighbourhoods became quieter. It was ‘weird being the only car on the road sometimes, on the way to work. Surreal really,’ reported a female essential worker, 50s, from the Kapiti Coast. With ‘no noise pollution from road traffic, [it’s] wonderful,’ wrote a woman living on a lifestyle block 4 kms from town. A woman farmer, 70, stated, ‘Quiet State Highway. It’s been wonderful.’

The reduction in noise and the changes in the mode of movement about an area led others to observe and remark on changes in the aural and visual landscape: ‘Children’s voices and laughter could be heard daily and frequently, along with lawnmowers and power tools, the latter as people worked on home projects,’ I noted. Others remarked on the birdlife: ‘Amazing amount of native birds...I hear more birdsong,’ said a neighbourhood resident, male, 70s. Several people commented on the presence of *piwakawaka*, a small native bird, also known as the fantail, regularly flying in and out of their houses or performing at their window each morning.

The absence of traffic, and the reduction of fumes and traffic noise impacted on the natural world and people’s awareness and experience of it. This was reflected in comments about birdlife and birdsong. While the awareness of

birdlife, which, in part, might be attributed to the fact that people were at home for unusually extended periods, also highlights how changes in human behaviour affected the environment, referred to by Michael McCarthy (2020) as the Anthropause. He argues that COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of engagement with nature for human wellbeing. He records that, with changes in human activity, such as the reduction in vehicle traffic and factory operations, skies cleared in India, wild creatures returned to inner city areas, and birdsong became audible in many parts of the world (McCarthy 2020, 8). That this 'colossal event, one of the biggest and most significant ever to have happened to the natural world...a planet-sized breathing space' (McCarthy 2020, 7) was observed in my own neighbourhood, signals a similar outcome as in other geographical locations. Such changes take us beyond our own locations and link us to family, friends and strangers in other locations. In the same way as war, epidemics and migration can be experiences in common, regardless of time or place; experience of the Anthropause deepened local connections and extended global belonging. This connecting beyond neighbourhood to encompass the global can be envisaged as an expansion of the web through the extension of filaments, and also thickening, deepening and elongating of the rhizome.

### *Connecting within boundaries*

During lockdown, people were directed to keep themselves contained in their home or suburb with only essential outings permitted. Observable was a rise in the numbers of people visible outdoors on and off their properties, creating knowledge (of their area and of other people) through movement (Ingold 2010). Social and public media reported similar activity throughout Aotearoa-New Zealand as, unlike many other nations, we were permitted to exercise relatively close to home whenever we chose. Morning, afternoon and evening, neighbourhood streets came alive with people walking, cycling, chatting and with children playing. Combinations varied, with folk of all ages out on foot or on bikes, scooters and skateboards, individually, in pairs or in family groups (one or two adults, one or more children), several with dogs. Some moved briskly; others strolled or stopped to chat, sometimes for extended periods (10-20 minutes), which they were less likely to do pre-lockdown: 'More people say hello and maybe stop to chat briefly at two metres,' reported a woman, suburban dweller, 60s. This demonstrates awareness of, and adherence to, the Government-emphasised physical distancing, with many people seen deliberately moving away from others and trying to stay two metres apart,

'Although sometimes the footpath can get a little crowded,' observed

a resident living in the suburb of a large city. It was not a problem I observed in my neighbourhood, where we could move into the roadway with ease.

Containment and awareness of the need to 'socially distance' also showed in the way residents remained within their family or friendship 'bubbles: both indoors and out, and in the creative ways some developed for face-to-face and longer engagement. These included gathering in physically distanced groups when walking or cycling; gathering at the ends of driveways, on lawns or in green spaces with one's own chairs, drinks and food to create a social but physically-distanced occasion. Keeping their own bubbles intact with different bubbles, the recommended distance apart, residents talked, laughed and shared jokes with passersby, as did families enjoying sunshine and a meal or drinks on their decks or front porches (Figure 3).

Residents could also be observed tending yards and gardens, doing house maintenance, painting roofs, airing linen, completing old or beginning new projects, and reorganising garages and garden sheds (Figure 4).

Through action, movement and emplacement, residents deepened their knowledge of the neighbourhood, and came to know their neighbourhood and their



Figure 3.





Figure 4.

neighbours differently, their behaviour mirroring that which Ingold (2010) discusses with movement through the area, re/creating connections – Geertz's (1987) 'webs of significance' – all nurturing the rhizome of belonging.

### *Collective engagement*

Just as folk found ways to create the social situations as described above, they also responded to the message that, 'We're in this together' (Hoffman 2020). This was demonstrated in local and national responses to three particular events, the first being 'The Great New Zealand Teddy Bear Hunt', based on Michael Rosen and Helen Oxenbury's classic tale, 'We're Going on a Bear Hunt', successful overseas, promoted via Facebook by Aotearoa-New Zealander Debby Hoffman and endorsed by Prime Minister Arden (Education Central 2020). The second was the annual Easter celebration, and the third, the annual Anzac Day commemorations. Responses were visible as temporary inscription, object placement and the marking of occasions (Figures 5 through 9).

Like many of their compatriots, residents placed bears and soft toys in their windows, on fences and front porches, beside downpipes and letter boxes, and on vehicle dashboards (Figure 5). Displays – 'lots of teddy bears in windows which aren't usually there'<sup>7</sup> – became evident in the ten days before lockdown



Figure 5.

began, with more displays being created throughout lockdown and many still there three months later. Similar displays were observable in adjacent suburbs and reported in social and public media. Such engagement – where the individual creates for collective consumption – shows kindness and generosity of spirit, with such engagement further developing webs of interconnection (Geertz 1973). It also shows that collective engagement is possible despite enforced separation. Digital media rendered it simpler to broadcast such events and share patterns, ideas, photographs and comments. This object emplacement and display also indicates a sense of connection beyond oneself, and renders visible the bonds people may feel with the wider community, just as the sunshine or dewdrops reveal the filaments of the web. The practices are also a form of nurture that strengthens and thickens belonging, enabling it to flourish and deepen. This can be envisaged as the rhizome sending up leaves, flowering and dying back, seeds and rhizome both able to contribute to developing belonging elsewhere.



### *Inscription*

With reduced vehicle movement, the use of roadways changed to become extended footpaths and expanded play areas. Without much traffic, they provided a safe location for inscription, as in the writing and drawings depicted below. Groups and individuals walked daily in the roadway. Chalked inscriptions could be found on footpaths, driveways, cul-de-sacs and roadways. These included drawings, games, Easter Eggs, messages, such as 'Miss you, love you', and exhortations, such as 'We can do this'. One family drew a hopscotch on the footpath adjacent to their home 'because we thought it would be nice for kids walking by to have something to do', while another family drew a 'Dance Party' on the footpath beyond their driveway, beginning with 'Welcome', ending with 'Well done'. This lengthened weekly to include circles, hopscotch, stepping-stones and more (Figure 6).

When rain fell in week three, drawings washed away. Fewer reappeared – maybe due to a lack of chalk, which, according to one Facebook post, was in short supply. But, as Waugh suggested was likely to happen in week three of lockdown, the atmosphere was changing. People were not as cheerful, some saying they felt frustrated or bored, 'dull', 'down' or 'a bit over it'. They wanted 'normal' back even though 'normal' would be different. Like the Italians, folk here and elsewhere were beginning to realise what the long-term social and economic impact could mean locally and nationally. 'But we still couldn't see an end, let alone envisage what that might look like,' I noted.

Inscribing the landscape, as in chalked footpaths and emplacement of teddies and soft toys, were individual practices signalling linkages to the collective. Some inscribed messages highlighted a sense of isolation for some, as in 'Miss You, Love You'. Reading the messages and playing the chalk-drawn games enabled viewers to engage indirectly with others and recognise that their feelings were likely similar. Thus, people could understand that they were in the same situation as others; that even though isolated, lockdown was a collective experience, with inscriptions creating indirect connections, building an awareness of shared experience, and adding a layer to belonging.

### *Easter celebrations*

Coming after Bear Hunt promotions, the annual Easter celebrations provided a second opportunity for the collective to engage in shared activity through individual practice, including inscription and sharing of objects. Via the news and social media, citizens were encouraged to participate in an Easter Egg Hunt by



Figure 6.

posting representations of Easter eggs in locations visible to passersby. The local newspaper printed egg outlines for display, but, even with prompting, uptake was lower than for the Bear Hunt, for reasons I have not investigated. Possibilities include Easter coinciding with week three of lockdown and people feeling less upbeat, as Waugh (2020) iterated, or people feeling that responding to the Bear Hunt had been enough. One or two chalked eggs and Easter messages appeared on footpaths (Figure 7a), in one window, a few hand-coloured egg posters kept soft toys company (Figure 7b) and elsewhere, a collection of rabbits

gazed upon the world (Figure 7c). Some folk gifted Easter treats to neighbours, friends and family, another couple made a special trip to deliver treats to grandchildren nearby, while another responded to the gift of a hand-drawn card and Easter treats by 'chalking a message and drawings' on the footpath outside her property. As with the Bear Hunt, these Easter practices, and even the generally lower spirits, connected residents emotionally – metaphorically thickening the rhizome while the webs being spun were rendered invisible. One could argue that the lesser engagement evident in Easter practices and the lowering of mood had a similar impact on belonging as a lack of nourishment, rainfall and nurturing on the rhizome, or the absence of sunshine on webs. Alternatively, it could be that the belonging remains but becomes less evident, just as the rhizome must cease flowering and rest before the next season, or the web cannot be spun or collapses if the conditions are wrong.



Figure 7.

*Commemorating Anzac Day*

Occurring a full month into lockdown, the nation's commemorations of Anzac Day on 25 April could not occur as the usual annual public ritual. Despite this, and although Anzac Day is a sombre reminder of past wars, loss of life and health, the mood lifted, perhaps because the Prime Minister had announced, on 20 April, that the alert level would be reduced to Level Three at 11.59 PM on 27 April (Ardern 2020b), and we would have a little more freedom.

Keen to mark Anzac Day, the New Zealand Defence Force (2020) promoted a change in the usual practice, the massed public gatherings of previous years with dawn parades and the laying of wreaths. Instead, the Force urged Aotearoa-New Zealanders to engage differently saying, 'Let's all #StandAtDawn – apart, but together as one'.<sup>8</sup> The public was further encouraged via news and social media to make and display Anzac poppy representations (Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 2021).<sup>9</sup> As a result, various displays appeared in yards, on fences and in windows. Resourcefulness showed in the use of red shopping bags, paper and card, and cupcake holders to craft poppies, large and small, or cut and coloured from the newspaper. Yard and window displays included photographs and narratives about family members who had participated in military service. These items, white crosses and drawings enlivened the area, and again increased the webs of connection (Gertz 1973; Figures 8a–e).

Having to be distanced during lockdown made the effort to stand together with neighbours at dawn meaningful, and created a sense *communitas* (Turner 1983); that sense of being together as one outside the usual parameters. Along with others throughout the land,

we rose in the night, walked to the end of our driveway, and stood near our mailbox. He tuned his I-pad into the radio broadcast and looked to see if anyone else was out. It was an uncanny experience with [the] wind rustling night-dark leaves, dark shadows speaking of neighbours opposite, and a streetlight illuminating residents further away. (Figures 8f, 8g) The broadcast had an echoey quality and, hearing the sound, a woman emerged from the night to join in. We stood still, quiet, steady, warmly wrapped, removed from one another, hearing together the prayers, the poetry, the speeches, moved to goosebumps as the Last Post was played, followed by Reveille. After exchanging greetings with neighbours, a sense of *communitas* enveloped me as I returned in that eerie morning light to the house.

(Digital diary; Figures 8f & g)





Figure 8.

These shared experiences and the engagement of the individual with the collective through sharing the Anzac Day ritual, combined with inscription, engagement and display, are further examples of practices that show how we engage in belonging. Through them, we see how belonging to people and place can be intensified through enactment, embodiment and emplacement (of self in the environment). Memories of such experiences remain long after the event, providing a shared reference that may enable relationships to be maintained,

hinting at the strength of belonging, even when not visible, just as the rhizome lies beneath the earth.

### *Kindness*

While engagement, as described above, drew people together, so did the practice of kindness. Manifestations of kindness and generosity increased in number and frequency during lockdown, along with inscriptions encouraging the practice. This was led by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern who encouraged the nation to, 'Be strong, be kind, we will be OK,' as international awareness of the potential impact of coronavirus grew (Whyte 2020). This 'Be kind, thoughtful and generous' message was repeated in Government messages and posters designed specifically to relay information (Ministry of Health 2020), indicating the role of the political in creating or deepening a national sense of belonging. Adding to the displays of bears, soft toys, Easter eggs and Anzac memorabilia noted above, and emphasising the message that 'We are all in this together', was the appearance of homemade signs encouraging these behaviours. Folk responded by sharing produce, checking in on neighbours and friends in person, by text, phone or social media, and purchasing and delivering groceries or donating items. Said one long-term suburb resident, 'There's a lot of it [kindness] about. I put out a call for wool and have had donations from hilltop folk and a gift from the wool shop in town.'

Surplus fruit and produce were shared by delivering items to others, placed in the community pantry or placed as giveaways on driveways, often with a chalked or handwritten note specifying 'Free' or 'Help Yourself' to feijoas, apples, walnuts, Jerusalem artichokes, figs, grapes, vegetable seedings and surplus plants or delivering groceries (Figure 9). Funeral attendance was restricted, but there were other ways to support others in their grief. When a resident of over 60 years died and made 'his last run' around the suburb in the hearse, a small group gathered at the entrance to the suburb, clapping as he passed. Bodily manifestations also indicated this spirit of kindness with 'more smiles' and 'more folk stopping to chat' and, responded one woman, 'I see awareness and considered action. As if we finally have time to act, instead of react (*sic*). [I see people making] different and more considerate choices. Kindness, joy, courage and connections.' Another said,

We live at the end of a country road with a generally supportive group of neighbours, but we have more chats, no need to hurry, seeing people out working on their properties, friendly greetings, random acts of kindness, much less traffic on the highway. Lovely.



Figure 9.

Such comments demonstrate how neighbours were in contact more regularly than pre-lockdown and how this deepened connections, as did the practices of kindness referred to above. These gifts of moral support, conversation and produce assisted in creating, deepening and enhancing connection and belonging to community and neighbourhood.<sup>10</sup> These practices can increase our knowledge and understanding of others and, in doing so, reduce or remove barriers, enabling trust to develop. Again, the rhizome thickens. As time passes, the connections may become less obvious. But, just as the rhizome remains viable in the ground, its growth can be re-invigorated when circumstances

change, and so too can belonging, as I assert it did during lockdown, our webs of connection within the neighbourhood growing.

#### CHALLENGES, BENEFITS, CHANGES

COVID-19 and the international reaction to it engendered changes in lifestyle in my neighbourhood and further afield. The Government-mandated lockdown generally increased individual awareness of the impact and severity of the disease and the importance of united action. Reflecting on lockdown experiences gave people the opportunity to discover and discuss what they perceived as advantages and disadvantages. Many relished a slower pace of life, but mourned the regularity of daily work and social life as they had known it, the absence of close physical contact, of freedom to go wherever they chose whenever they wanted. Anxiety levels rose as folk worried about the economic impact, often isolated from family, friends and colleagues. Enforced domesticity added stress, compounded by containing and home-schooling children, or spending more time than usual with the household occupants. For many essential workers, new or increased workplace responsibilities created additional stress along with the fear of infection. These extra, unanticipated duties required changes in practice to ensure shoppers maintained their distance, making such requirements visible by placing signs in workplaces and, increasingly, filling online grocery orders. Much of this was made visible in comments from participants who, as mentioned previously, had responded to questions I posed online: 'What do you notice that's different about your neighbourhoods during this Level 4? What has changed over the four plus weeks? What has been difficult?'

Responses demonstrated that many people found lockdown challenging, with advantages and disadvantages. Overall, most appeared to feel relatively upbeat during the first fortnight, sharing jokes, music and thoughts about how to make the most of being confined. Those who could, enjoyed the slower pace. Workers enjoyed driving on quieter roads and reaching work in a shorter time. A part-time female administrator in her 50s reflected,

It has taken me ages to figure out why this whole situation has felt vaguely familiar, but I have finally figured it out...this is how I felt, and almost how we behaved, when we were in the UAE (United Arab Emirates). We did do some socialising, but it was limited and highly organised. The rest of the time, the kids and I were in our bubble together, at home or swimming at the local hotel, home-schooling, and all the rest of that. I didn't have the vague unease this time because I am living in a place I trust, with a government and policing system



that I trust. I have been consciously appreciating this time with my kids together – the likelihood of having this much time all together in the future is practically zero, now that J is at Uni, etc. That has been my main focus and I feel a sense of achievement, even though some of the things I thought I'd get to on my list have not been touched. Too much pressure having to do the usual level of housekeeping plus cook all meals, look after children, and (supposedly) work full-time from home. Was mad, until I decided to give myself *carte blanche* to ignore everyone and look after myself first. My husband has been very helpful.

Being unable to work or volunteer during lockdown led to some participants expressing feelings of inadequacy, particularly when trained in areas regarded as essential. Some expressed frustration at not being asked to help, while others felt guilty because they did have the skills to help. In contrast, others accepted the situation and concluded the best thing they could do was stay home and stay safe, which a nurse friend endorsed. There was also 'growing concern about the huge collateral damage being sustained by the lockdowns...alcoholism, domestic abuse, rape, suicide...these are life-long consequences,' wrote a social worker contact.

As Waugh (2020) had predicted, through week three, the mood flattened, with several participants describing themselves as feeling down, depressed, less hopeful, more frustrated, flat, depressed or tired. One described the experience of lockdown as 'hard. Lonely but not lonely.' Many said they missed actual social and physical contact, even though social media enabled opportunities for virtual contact, such as on-line family birthday parties, social gatherings, and conferences with colleagues. That this was virtual emphasised the severity of the situation and the dangers associated with the pandemic.

'On-line gatherings aren't the same. They don't make up for being there in person,' said a still-employed man, 70, sad that he was unable to visit his grandchildren on their birthdays, enjoy Friday night drinks with friends, or interact with colleagues in person. Such feelings were reflected in my own household: 'I feel flat' said my husband. 'So do I,' I replied. He was not alone. 'I have definitely missed social interaction and personal hugs from close friends and family,' posted a female participant, 40s, on social media.

While home detention and lockdown have similarities, with those in home detention likely to settle into and accept their situation by week four (Waugh 2020), it did not appear to be the same for local residents and online partici-

pants during lockdown. One difference may be that those in home detention have a finite term to serve, unlike COVID-19 where there was no finite end to the pandemic, and ongoing uncertainty around health, the economy and whether and when the nation would move to a lower alert level. This may be partly why late in week four and in week five the mood was mixed. It began with the Prime Minister's 20 April announcement that the country would move to Level Three at midnight on 27 April.

Participants remarked that they felt relief at the prospect of living 'more normally' and being able to go beyond their neighbourhoods. Some were increasingly anxious: 'It (the prospect) gives us a boost – but I am an anxious wreck. There's heaps of good stuff, but there are psychological effects too,' said a woman in her 50s. This may have been because being around people en masse could be confronting due to the risk of infection. Referring to a feeling of 'ennui' a few days into level three, a woman in her 60s wrote,

We 'lost' a person (our son) from our bubble, as he headed back to his home when he could...perhaps that anticipated absence provided a sense of sadness to how I was feeling. I am pleased he is back safely in his own home now though, with his partner. Thank goodness for Facetime meetings.

Four days into level three, I recognised the emotional impact the lockdown had had on me when my daughter asked, 'How are you?' 'I'm okay,' I said, but later wrote,

I am so over COVID-19. Over housework, cleaning, clearing, sorting, preserving, foraging, gardening. I am glad I am now settled enough to read and watch TV. I couldn't sit still before. I am over working from home with the challenge of a small screen and slow printer – things I used to take for granted. Over being resourceful, cheerful, challenged. Over not having a 'usual' life. Over not seeing family and friends and being able to hang out and just 'do' things at a whim. Sounding spoiled. I know I am lucky. And I am over the platitudes and warnings and the sadnesses and all. Just over it. Oh, yes, I will keep going because that's what we do. But I bet there's lots of folk feeling like me.

The move to level three led to a reversion of some practices and a disappearance of others, evidenced in a reduction in walking and cycling, more motor vehicles on the road, increased fumes and traffic noise, absence of inscription on road and footpath, and the removal of many displayed items. The numbers

of residents evident in their yards and on the streets waned as folk took up opportunities to purchase items more widely and travel further afield. Even so, one could argue that while many of the practices described above diminished, neighbourhood belonging had increased. The experience of lockdown was one mutually experienced and the practices engaged in had created not only memories, but extended, deepened and expanded resident connections to community and place through engagement, movement through the landscape, collective engagement and shared experiences. After the rhizome flowers, it sets seed and the leaves die back. It remains viable but, lying below the earth, unseen. One might argue that the changes following the move into level three and the change in practice will impact on belonging in the same way as the cycle of nature impacts on the rhizome.

## CONCLUSION

This paper focused on the impact of COVID-19 on belonging in one provincial suburban neighbourhood and its environs in Aotearoa-New Zealand, drawing on observations of neighbourhood practice during Aotearoa-New Zealand's initial lockdown and a few days either side. A glimpse into neighbourhood experiences and practices was provided through personal observation, photographs and comment. These observations were augmented by online, emailed, telephoned and face-to-face comments from folk further afield. Analysis showed that practices of belonging to neighbourhood and community (locally, nationally and globally) were altered, deepened and strengthened individually and collectively during lockdown and altered again at level three.

Initial changes were engendered by the Government directive to lockdown nationally, to maintain distance, and to stay home and stay safe, effectively creating a temporal and bounded space, somewhat liminal in nature. Changes in practice were signalled locally with an increase in individual movement through the landscape, inscription, emplacement, embodiment, collective engagement, sharing stories and experiences of COVID-19, and through more regular engagement with nearby residents. Changes were tangible and observable, visually or intangibly, but describable verbally with benefits becoming apparent almost immediately and disadvantages later.

Initial changes arose as vehicle movements, traffic noise and fumes reduced, and the numbers of pedestrians and cyclists moving about the neighbourhood, and at work, in homes and yards, increased. Further changes, driven or supported by the Government, public and social media, led to individual engagement in collective events, including the Bear Hunt, Easter and Anzac Day celebrations.

Associated inscription and private displays for public consumption signalled engagement with the collective, awareness of others, and an effort to involve, distract and entertain as lockdown progressed. Effectively, such practices revealed the benefits of lockdown, such as the opportunity to complete projects, spend time with family, and make or renew connections with neighbours and the local area. The natural environment flourished, highlighting the Anthro-pause locally. This connected the local to the global, an experience in common linking folk across the world, just as the fine, elastic filaments stretch in space and support the web.

As lockdown progressed, disadvantages became apparent and/or were experienced as irksome. These included loss of freedoms; massive and unexpected changes in daily living, employment and social life; the absence of close physical contact with family and friends; the in/ability to choose where to be and when; enforced domesticity; isolation from family, friends and colleagues; and having to contain and home school children. Some folk developed depression, anxiety or a sense of ennui.

Returning to Deleuze and Guatarri's (1987) metaphorical rhizome and Geertz's concept of the web (1973), I conclude that the experience of lockdown and early level three, at least in one provincial suburban area, changed practices and increased belonging. As webs of connection altered or were re/created through acts of kindness, direct and indirect environmental and human engagement, webs of significance and connection became more visible, while the rhizome flourished, deepening and thickening. Changes were evidenced in the practices described and discussed above.

That these practices have not continued exactly as during lockdown does not imply the loss of all benefits nor the disappearance of all disadvantages. The experience does, however, highlight that global emergencies and politically directed changes can have unanticipated positive and negative consequences. In this case, neighbourhood connections flourished through being nurtured, just as the rhizome flourishes when nurtured and the damaged web renewed. National and global connections also thickened, extended and expanded through common and shared experiences. Even so, other responses indicate that belonging diminished for those who described feeling detached, disconnected or isolated, just as rhizomes deteriorate or the web is damaged or broken in certain circumstances.

I conclude that lockdown led to changes in local practices and impacted on belonging. These changes demonstrated that belonging, however weak, dam-

aged, neglected, smothered or non-existent, can be created, revived, reinvigorated and restored as it is mutable, malleable and variable. The construction and maintenance of belonging requires time, space, attention and the willingness of people to re/engage, while intertwining the metaphors of the rhizome and the web enhance our means of understanding belonging in all its complexity, locally, nationally and globally.

*Footnote:* During the past year, I have monitored people's responses to the challenges of COVID-19, Government-mandated changes in alert levels, and observed the ongoing display of associated signage and reminders of how to keep ourselves safe. In the local area, the strengthening of belonging is revealed in small ways – with the establishment of craft and garden groups, and gardens; community engagement in beautification; continued sharing of produce and goods via direct exchanges and the community pantry; and embodiment with waves and smiles when folk encounter one another.

#### NOTES

- 1 Penny Robinson is a self-employed social historian based in Whanganui, Aotearoa-New Zealand. She received her doctorate in Anthropology from Massey University, Palmerston North. Her doctorate looked at practices of belonging amongst women in Whanganui and she retains an interest in the topic. She assists in the recording and writing of life stories and community histories.  
Email: penny@robinsonassociates.nz
- 2 For reasons of space, I use the term lockdown to refer to the initial phase of Alert Level 4.
- 3 Scheduled to last four weeks, the 2020 lockdown was extended to five weeks.
- 4 A 31 December report from Wuhan Municipal Health Commission, China, spoke of a 'cluster of pneumonia cases' in Wuhan, Hubei Province. A novel coronavirus is eventually identified (WHO 2020).
- 5 Inscription here refers to messages and drawings on the hard surfaces of roads, footpaths, fences and signboards.
- 6 'Bubble' is a term used to describe 'all the people who share your household... (and) [were] under the same roof as you when the clock struck 11.59 pm' on 25 March (Webb-Liddall 2020). Later, people were allowed to extend their bubble to include another person living alone.

- 7 Female respondent, 30s, suburban dweller reported this online, 24 April 2020, referring to her observations during walks with her children.
- 8 The Defence Force asked that on 25 April people rise at dawn to listen to a special dawn service, keeping to their bubbles, and wearing a poppy. Suggested locations included driveways, courtyards, gardens, balconies or in front of the TV. Morning services were to be broadcast on Radio NZ National and would include relevant music: the 'Ode of Remembrance in Te Reo and English', national anthems (Aotearoa-New Zealand and Australia) and an address by the Minister of Defence/Minister for Veterans (NZ Defence Force 2020).
- 9 'The red poppy', URL: <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/war/anzac-day/poppies>, (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 8-Apr-2021 Accessed 15 May 2021; Geary, A. Anzac Day can be marked during COVID-19 lockdown 15 April 2020 Timaru Herald. Accessed 15 May 2021
- 10 One year on, a distant neighbour who I saw infrequently made the effort to bring me figs, as she had done the year before. The ripe fruit had recalled to her actions during lockdown, demonstrating the thickening of connection through our shared experience.

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