Henriette Steiner, Kristin Veel

TOUCH IN THE TIME OF CORONA

REFLECTIONS ON LOVE, CARE, AND VULNERABILITY IN THE PANDEMIC

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Reflections on Love, Care, and Vulnerability
in the Pandemic

by Henriette Steiner and Kristin Veel

DE GRUYTER

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Dance me through the panic till I'm gathered safely in
Touch me with your naked hand or touch me with your glove
Dance me to the end of love

Leonard Cohen, "Dance Me to the End of Love"

Photo of the authors by Liv Løvetand Rahbek

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Copenhagen, March 25, 2021

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Introduction

Cowriting in a Time of Social Distance: Caressing Distance and Accepting Vulnerability

> I literally haven't gone beyond my own front yard in two weeks. I speak to my neighbors through the windows. One of them has the virus. We help him by organizing bags of groceries, which we leave on the sidewalk outside his house. A couple of children play a game called "virus" in the street. They yell to each other: "The stick has corona, watch out!" "The car has corona, don't touch it!" "You touched it, now you have corona!" They run up and down the street, yelling and laughing. (HS)

> My best friend lives two thousand miles away
> and every day
> my fingertips bleed distilled intimacy
> trapped Pavlovas
> dance, I curse, dance
> bring her to me
> the bandwidth of her smell[1]

COVID-19, the coronavirus infection that caused the global pandemic, has entailed a massive reconfiguration of relationships: with oneself, with other people, with places, with things. These reconfigurations are not only part of a temporary state of emergency, but will continue to affect the people and societies that are currently living through the pandemic. Simple tasks such as opening a door, speaking to someone in the street, or going shopping can now be seen as challenges fraught with the risk of infection. Other people are potential transmitters of the virus, which can make the city's open spaces seem unsafe. Even the gentlest and most caring touch can spread the disease.

In March 2020, when more and more parts of the world were enforcing the first lockdowns, global media overflowed with oxymorons about how good it was to be together apart. Collective singing and other cultural activities – performed from balconies or in front of TVs – created a sense of togetherness and solidarity. Time was counted in days-of-lockdown. Online newspapers switched from clickbait headlines to live feeds, because developments happened too fast to register in the normal layout. Those who were able to do so self-isolated in their homes, while much of their work and social lives went digital. The contested public forum of social media and video conferencing platforms became a principal space in which to meet and share experiences. Many people were forced to stop the activities that kept them economically afloat, while doctors,

nurses, cleaners, and maintenance workers found themselves having to deal with the virus and its potentiality through most of their waking hours.

It almost feels like an understatement to say that the pandemic has had an impact on a gigantic scale. It has had wide social, political, economic, ecological, emotional, and epistemological effects. While the virus itself is a silent and tiny physical entity that is difficult to see, the spillover effects can be witnessed or felt even if we ourselves have not been infected. If we wish to comprehend the way the pandemic affects humans in a wider sense, the vocabularies of epidemiology and the medical sciences can only take us partway. We need to engage with the affective and often contradictory categories through which we experience the pandemic, the way its effects become visible, felt, or noticed. These categories concern personal experience and situated interpretation, and they include emotions such as anxiety, solitude, fear, pain, sorrow, bereavement, compassion, numbness, boredom, uncertainty, craving, security, freedom, or even excitement. In this book, we therefore join other researchers, writers, and artists who have turned to the cultural and political implications of the pandemic as an object of inquiry or interpretation.[2] At the same time, we also draw on personal experience, in part writing a chronicle, a memoir, and a reflection as much as a cultural analysis of some of the new spatial, social, and epistemological forms that arose during the pandemic's first year.

For most of 2020, populations held their breath as scientists and pharmaceutical companies worked to produce a vaccine as a means to end the pandemic, all while the pandemic itself unfolded in a temporal mode of latency. Exponentially rising infection numbers loomed as a constant, latent possibility that needed to be held in check. Outbreaks of disease could erupt at any time and in any place, as witnessed when infection numbers rocketed in particular institutions, neighborhoods, cities, regions, or countries. Now, at the time of writing in March 2021, in the midst of the largest mass inoculation program known to human history, this sense of latency still dominates the pandemic predicament. We are overshadowed by delay, and by an uncertainty as to when, how, and in what form the pandemic will next manifest itself. Moreover, there are increasing reports of people suffering from late sequelae, battling long-term effects of COVID-19 infection. This latency is unlikely to dissipate entirely, even once sufficiently large population groups have received the vaccine. SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes the COVID-19 infection, will likely continue to replicate and mutate, if not in human hosts then in animals;[3] and it will continue to reverberate in people who show the longer-term effects known as "long COVID," or the specific post-COVID neurological symptoms that have been found in a

large proportion of patients.[4] It is crucial to understand the latency at work in the pandemic, and the futurity it implies: the sense that it will probably be impossible to eliminate the virus completely, and that future outbreaks of the disease are a given, even though we do not know when, where, or how severe they will be. We believe that the way this latency compels us to reflect on our future vulnerability – not so much individually, but as a collective – may tell us something significant about the pandemic's long-term cultural and social effects.

Our understanding the pandemic as a predicament that stretches into the future and concerns human emotions, relationships, and behaviors as well as bodily, social, and economic conditions is aptly captured by the notion of *touch*. Touch is a primary vehicle of the spread of the disease – epitomizing a point of contact whose effect is revealed only after a delay. Hugs, handshakes, kisses, and physical proximity are all commonplace forms of interaction that we are asked to avoid during the pandemic, prompting us to find other ways of touching and being touched by others. Taking a feminist perspective, in this book we wish to unpack some of the challenges to human interactions – to love, and to our care for each other and the surrounding environment – that this suspicion against human touch brings with it. Yet, at the same time, we accept the vulnerability that is implied when we are meant to caress distance rather than other human beings.

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Since the early months of 2020, policies have been put into play across the globe to hinder the spread of the virus by limiting physical proximity, interaction, and touch between human beings. Through the different forms of lockdown and restrictions imposed during the pandemic, people are meant to internalize collective ways of acting so as to hinder the spread of the disease. The required actions differ from place to place and often leave room for individual interpretation. Yet they all favor distance over touch, compliance over improvisation, withdrawal over expansion, patience over action, and restraint over risk-taking. This means that they imply human moral qualities that seem to be the opposite of what makes economies grow, and thus to contradict Western capitalism's promise to create richer and better futures. We believe that these moral reorientations can also be characterized as latent, but with a much longer incubation period than the virus itself. And while we have no doubt that highly invasive disciplinary techniques abound in this situation, we also see hope. The impetus to be careful, cautious, and considerate may in fact not only point to

crisis but also suggest ways out of the crisis by gesturing toward alternative forms of collectivity and ethics. Cooling down feverish economies, creating space to think and act differently and to imagine alternative futures, might even lead to demands for more equitable, just, and compassionate social, political, ecological, and spatial practices in the future.[5]

We thus cling (feverishly) to a more hopeful starting point than Italian political philosopher Giorgio Agamben, who in the early days of the pandemic caused controversy by suggesting that the new regime of biosecurity was a slippery slope toward totalitarianism. In the face of physical distancing measures, Agamben noted that it was "legitimate to ask whether such a society can still be defined as human or whether the loss of sensible relations, of the face, of friendship, of love can be truly compensated for by an abstract and presumably completely fictitious health security."[6] We certainly acknowledge the hidden regimes of restructuring whereby living in pandemic times nourishes surveillance capitalism's dehumanization, and we recognize that the inequality and exploitation of others increases when those regimes coalesce with a politics that is protective of capitalism. But in this book we would like to emphasize that the shaking up of anthropocentric hierarchies during the pandemic is also an opportunity to think differently about nature-culture relationships, and about normative instantiations.

This book thus departs from a tension-filled mixture of dire outlooks and hopeful suggestions for transformation in response to the experience of the past year. Tackling this duality, we propose to read the spatial and affective reconfigurations brought about by human and political responses to the pandemic through a lens of utopian feminism. This is a way of thinking that is attuned to the interweaving of politics with the private lives of our minds and bodies. It looks for the inequalities, injustices, and complexities embedded in the new moral regimes and ethical quandaries that the pandemic has brought to light. Yet it also strives for a mode of *collective thinking*, one that dares to think differently and to imagine new and perhaps more equitable relationships with other people, other species, and the biophysical world around us. Might unexpected relationships and hierarchies emerge if we consider the ways in which the pandemic has overhauled relations of love, care, and individual and collective vulnerability?

The spread of the virus has been metaphorized as the natural phenomenon of a "wave" rolling out across society, with more or less intensity, and in rhythmic movements that require different forms of response, or no response at all. Waves have peaks and troughs, and smooth sailing requires skill and intuition. There are seemingly carefree pockets where infection numbers are low, and

where physical touch, intimacy, expressions of love and care, and social gatherings can take place with no great risk of setting a new wave in motion. The high summer of 2020 in Denmark was one such pocket that we both experienced firsthand. But another peak hit the country around Christmas in 2020, leading to a second hard lockdown, which extended through the winter and is only beginning to ease as we write this, around the first anniversary of Denmark's first lockdown. Yet as we have watched the numbers of infections, hospitalizations, and deaths rise, fall, and rise again, and as we have witnessed the altercations about vaccine distribution across the globe, we have learned that there are many different stories to be told about the pandemic and its effects than those of direct bereavement or suffering due to the disease itself. These stories are tied to individuals' personal and economic situations; they are tied to questions of class, race, gender, age, and bodily and mental adeptness and ability; they are intertwined with the general societal frameworks in which individuals are situated. It is at that intersection between material and political contexts and personal predicaments that this book approaches the coronavirus as a crisis.

We propose to understand the pandemic not within the warlike metaphorical framework of besiegement or defeating the virus through a vaccine or cure, but rather as operating in an affective realm of care situated close to the body, epitomized in changed forms of touch and touching due to social and physical distancing measures. Our possibilities for touch, touching, and being touched, both physically and affectively, are reconfigured by the pandemic.[7] How do love, care, and the sticky dependencies among humans, machines, and nature play out in the interval between abandoned city centers and digitally mediated gatherings? How can we comprehend the reconfiguration of relationships through the human response to the pandemic as an experience that concerns us all but affects us in different ways? How do we think through the technological-material dependencies that the situation of affective distance during the pandemic has established, and how does this allow us to imagine alternative futures after the current crisis has subsided – utopian as well as dystopian? Alternatively, how do we learn to cope with the virus's latent potentiality not as a problem that can be fixed, or which has a clear endpoint for us to work toward, but as an uncomfortable, gigantic, looming mirror of our own vulnerability, as individuals and as a collective – a mirror of which this pandemic is only the most recent iteration?

Following this introduction's reflection on the book's methodology and some of its key themes, five short chapters mix personal narratives, media stories, and images. The chapters discuss concrete scenarios that reflect some of the challenges and opportunities for touching and being touched brought about

by cultural techniques used to preserve physical distance during the pandemic. These scenarios, which can be read as stand-alone essays, shed light on forms of digital intimacy (Chapter 1), the implications of the politics of face masks, using Denmark as an example (Chapter 2), the rolling out of new behavioral norms in public spaces (Chapter 3), how situations of quarantine and lockdown at home call attention to what we call "pandemic stuckness" (Chapter 4), and finally, what temporalities the pandemic offers or enhances (Chapter 5). In this way, we unpack the configurations of digital communication, physical isolation, and dependencies on other people, places, and things that characterize many people's experience of the pandemic. We thus describe and interpret some of the pandemic's reconfigurations of physical and affective relationships across architectural, urban, and digital spaces, and we highlight their consequences.

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A sense of crisis emerges when a situation does not meet our expectations of the future: for example, if we expect a certain condition such as economic growth to remain stable and beneficial, and that expectation is not met. Potentially endless economic growth is a widespread horizon of expectation that characterizes modern Western culture – in contrast, for example, to the medieval mercantilist view that there is a fixed amount of wealth in the world. Today, economic recession or even zero growth constitutes a financial crisis because it circumvents the assumption that constant economic growth is a given. Similarly, the pandemic is a health crisis because it goes against the understanding that even if medical knowledge and health services cannot eradicate each and every death, then at least they are on a progressive track of curing diseases of which people previously died. German historian Reinhart Koselleck links this understanding of crisis to a particular historical point in the nineteenth century, when understandings of time and history as linear and progressing into a future dominated. This modern understanding of crisis is connected with a particular horizon of expectation, an understanding that the future is something that humans can change through their actions and that they can change it for the better, so that the future will be richer, safer, and healthier than the present. It is when the experience of continuous betterment, growth or prosperity does not happen that the feeling of crisis emerges.[8] The modern view of humans as agents that are able to influence cultural conditions and predicaments for the better, and to spur economic growth, is therefore also linked to capitalist society's under-

standing of progression and progressiveness.[9] Crisis erupts at the moment when such expectations are refuted and rebuked.

With the current pandemic, Western societies have found themselves challenged by a nearly invisible, nonhuman, invasive agent that requires us to slow down, keep our distance, and avoid doing the things that keep the capitalist economy going and growing – because the spread of the virus thrives on human contact, proximity, and touch. But this situation is not just a modern crisis of disappointed expectations of future growth and prosperity. The pandemic also implies a different sense of crisis, with a temporality that does not point into the future in a linear way. Rather, this is a constant, latently unfolding, and traveling crisis that ultimately impacts most of the globe with the looming potentiality of viral outbreaks.[10] It also constitutes a crisis in the way we understand what the word *crisis* means, since it challenges our concepts of time and history as linear – indeed, it operates in what we can call a *broad present* whereby future opportunity has already been informed by the past's imposition on the present.

This crisis of crises, and its link to latency as an experience of time, is not confined to the pandemic. In our recent book *Tower to Tower*, we identified the broad present's gigantic, latent sense of crisis as particularly clearly manifested in contemporary digital culture; for example, it is visible in the way algorithmic operations predict how we will feel, and how we will spend our time and money online, based on our past and present online behavior.[11] These conditions have been amplified by the pandemic, which confines billions of people to online interactions. The consequences of these reconfigurations require careful reading across architecture and digital culture – which is what we do in this book.

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From a political perspective, the COVID-19 pandemic is a human crisis. From a human perspective, the effects of COVID-19 are molded by the political response to that crisis. But humans share a fate with the virus itself, as well as with other mammals – including mink, big cats, apes, and household pets such as cats and dogs – insofar as they can contract the disease, which in turn can mutate in the host regardless of whether that host is human or animal. Thus, while the pandemic is a human crisis, it also challenges anthropocentric hierarchies, because it reveals that our relationships with animals are highly complex. The pandemic brings to light some of the true costs of how we regard not only other people but also other species and ecosystems as resources to be exploited. The virus itself is zoonotic: its jump from animals to humans was likely made possible by the conditions of wet markets in China and Southeast Asia, where humans and

different species of living wild animals are packed together in close quarters.[12] The abrupt slaughter of seventeen million mink in Denmark, a country with a population of around six million people, when the virus spread – and naturally also mutated – on mink farms is another example of how humans' treatment of animals as a resource in the context of the pandemic had unexpected and adverse effects, a story that quickly traveled the world's media.[13] Suddenly, the health authorities were counting the Danish population in mink+humans, coming up with a total of twenty-three million individuals that could be infected and thus provide the virus with a larger population in which to mutate. The fear was that vaccine developments and the control of the pandemic were at risk, as has been the case with other mutations – for instance, the so-called Kent variant (first detected in the UK), which has been proven to spread more easily, or other variants that are known to be able to bypass the immunity provided by current vaccines.[14] In Denmark, in November 2020 the mutation associated with the outbreaks on mink farms led to the rash political decision to order the swift cull of the mink and the polluting disposal of their bodies, with vast economic and personal consequences for the farmers, as well as environmental tolls due to the polluting disposal of their bodies.[15] This was done despite a lack of evidence of this specific mutation's epidemiological significance, and also without taking the time to secure the legality of the order – thus arguably illustrating Agamben's concerns about the danger of the pandemic as a state of emergency.[16] While many people would welcome the death blow to this particular industry, the example is nonetheless particularly charged, and it also demonstrates the risks and costs of an economy based on the highly industrialized production of animal products such as meat or fur.

The brutal mink+human politics in Denmark speaks to the way the pandemic unfolds in jagged ontological, moral, spatial, and temporal categories that collapse some of the linear causalities Western societies are used to (e.g. the higher the output of an industry, the higher the gain), leaving a trail of uncertainty regarding who or what has been infected, in what way, and at what cost. This uncertainty may be converted into administrative formulas that seek to predict the sprawling and bifurcating future by introducing different surveillance techniques. Such techniques can be found, for example, in testing regimes (for both humans and animals), the manual detective work of tracing who has been in contact with whom, the automated tracking of contact tracing apps that chart encounters between smartphones, or the tracing of genetic mutations in the virus as it spreads across geographical distances and between animals and humans. Yet in order for these systems to work, a high degree of transparency, knowledge, openness, and trust is essential.[17] Moreover, the sick,

vulnerable body must reveal (and indeed be aware of) its own potential sickness. This requirement for openness and transparency gives rise to oblique and blind angles that are open to misunderstanding, conflict, and exploitation, as evidenced by many of the examples we discuss in this book.

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Spatially, the pandemic has an impact at the most local and intimate levels. For example, it demands withdrawal and restraint when families and friends are separated due to the risk of infection but it also creates spatial invasiveness when work is carried out from home. Such precautionary measures are mediated by a number of cultural techniques and objects: health-related precautions such as masks, gloves, visors, disinfectants, medical tests, and contact tracing apps; the screens, apps, and online platforms that allow us to preserve the habitual forms of human interaction that no longer need to occur face-to-face; the reorganization of architectures, and of bodies in space, as we avoid bodily contact and proximity to others, and as public or commercial physical spaces are reordered with grids, plexiglass booths, and demarcation lines to keep people apart. However, while media and cultural techniques for establishing distance have specific health-related functions, they are *experienced affectively* by the individual in the situation. Moreover, they are *politicized*, because each nation-state and local authority throughout the development of the pandemic has imposed and prioritized different forms of lockdown and distancing, from closing borders to making face masks compulsory in shops or on public transit. Such techniques are therefore also measures that *discipline* individuals in ways that have biopolitical ramifications: spatial and legal measures that have an effect on who lives, who dies, and whose stories will be told when histories of the pandemic are written.

   The use of digital technologies as mediators and safeguards of distance in the pandemic – from online shopping, to meetings for work or with friends and family, to online computer game forums for children who are out of school, or even online dating – heightens such technologies' promises of salvation, of creating a parallel, digital world that is more appealing than the physical world around us. As media theorist Wendy Hui Kyong Chun argued long before the pandemic, the logic of digital media thrives on crises: social media, news platforms, and the like solicit real-time responses and demand engagement, but at the same time these media threaten to exhaust us with repetitive acts of an almost compulsory nature, as we are urged to continuously "like" or comment on particular posts.[18] This means that networked digital media accustom us to the

experience of crisis as a permanent state of affairs, rather than as an exception to the normal. With a feeling of relief due to technology's promise to mitigate the risk of infection, we now replace human presence and touch with mediated conversations and collaborations; in return, we pay for this risk reduction with our dependency on machines and digital networks, and with the heightened tracking, analysis, and manipulation of our emotional lives and desire to spend time and money online. Yet at the same time, as we become hooked anew on digital technologies, we also experience digital technologies in new, tactile, and indeed haptic ways – allowing us to reach out and touch one another through digitally wired channels.

A heightened awareness of health risks and hygiene gives rise to haptic considerations in even mundane decisions. If I am to avoid getting close to or touching other people or things, ought I to hug a crying child or a close friend who has experienced bereavement? Ought I to hold onto a banister rail to avoid tripping on the stairs? Which forms of touching do I rule out? Is it a sign of care-lessness or self-care to avoid contacts that might be critical for others? And how do physical or behavioral mediators – such as gloves, face masks, hand sanitiz-ers, or coughing into one's elbow – impact the choreography of such scenarios? The situation is a complicated and constantly shifting matrix of care, careless-ness and self-care that is highly dependent on time and place, and which is uncomfortable when measured in relation to questions concerning personal freedom (as testified by the demonstrations against restrictions that have sur-faced in many countries) as well as freedom from the conditions of embodiment. While we as individuals can create pockets of care and touch, and can be close-ly tied to a few (sometimes claustrophobic and destructive) relationships with the people and things we rub against – lovers, children, the walls of our home, the nation-state – lockdown, social distancing, and hygiene requirements create systematic and imperative distances from the many people and places that comprise the shared decorum of civic life. As the social, economic, and health-related consequences of the pandemic continue to impact people and communi-ties in highly uneven ways – thereby raising questions of health care and body politics – different and changing notions of touch and touching snap into focus.

Understanding the current crisis requires vocabularies that are detached from linear and rationalist ideas. These vocabularies concern affective relation-ships that are marked by the looming presence of latent future viral eruptions, sickness, and even death. This future materializes in the viral pathogens them-selves, which an individual can either encounter or avoid, in a binary pattern – although no individual knows *how* severely they would be affected if they were to become infected. When seen in a socioeconomic framework, moreover, the

pandemic is also a crisis of who can afford to mitigate the risk of an illness about whose long-term effects we know very little. It is a crisis that reveals other latent vulnerabilities that force people to weigh the unknown risk of infection against other predicaments, such as the psychological toll of social isolation, or the economic ruin of not being able to work. It builds an expansive futurity that has already potentially chewed its way into the present, and which is brought about by touch and proximity – with secretions, aerosols, or droplets of saliva from infected humans or animals, spreading the virulent genome.

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This book was cowritten by two individuals who are experiencing the pandemic in tandem, and in rather similar ways. We live in the same city; we both have university jobs; we have both felt overwhelmed and overtasked by new forms of care work for colleagues and students, for parents, and for small children at home during lockdowns. We are both crudely aware that our experience of Zoom fatigue is a problem of privilege, and that care work offers rich clusters of experience and intimacy that run counter to many other people's economic despair, anxiety, or solitude during the pandemic.

Nevertheless, the emergence of physical and affective distance meant that writing apart became the explicit method of this book, and we therefore consider our collaboration itself as an opportunity to reflect on the distances brought on by the pandemic. Our forced physical separation played out alongside the various digital prosthetics of computers and file-sharing options that we used. Echoing Susan Leigh Star's seminal, poetic feminist account from 1995 of digital culture's implications for affective relationships and ecologies of knowledge (see epigraph above),[19] our situation shed light on the pandemic's reconfiguration of relationships among material, digital, and human cultures. Moreover, cowriting (in this case, cowriting apart) is connected to well-known feminist practices of collaboration and offers a mode of reflection that undercuts the individual authorial subject. Cowriting's detached touch is both haptic and affective. This emphasizes the difficulty of separating the study of material things from practices for thinking and feeling, as well as the difficulty of separating writing from thinking. As gender studies scholar Nina Lykke has stated, language is not a passive medium for transparent communication, but an active, ambiguous, and slippery phenomenon out of which writing, method, methodology, epistemology, ethics, and politics emerge as inextricably knitted together.[20] We have found that, despite distancing measures, cowriting in fact allows a particular kind of touch and touching. We therefore wish to tease out

the affective responses that are tied to individual experiences in ways that hint at how others may be differently implicated in and by those experiences. The short textual fragments of individual experience (marked by our individual initials) with which we start each chapter are a way to underscore this tension and highlight the different forms of reflection – from the highly subjective, situated, and personal to the academically ordered – in which we engage in this book.

Thus, this book tightly intertwines writing as self-care, as care for other people or the object of analysis, and as a way to unravel complex processes of change. We are interested in how the changed conditions of touch and touching brought on by human and political responses to the pandemic affect what knowledge is possible in this situation – an interest that inevitably extends to how we ourselves are implicated in knowledge production. In this context, it *does matter* that writing has not been a solitary experience but a way of sharing. Through our privileged position as writers, safe at home, we each let our words rub off on the other's separate world; at the same time, the writing was a means by which we created distance from our own feelings and observations, freezing them in space and time.

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Feminist scholars have long addressed the possibility of a different ethics of care, one that cannot be untied from one's bodily or cultural context, or from the constraints on ability and opportunity that this context imposes. This includes care for nonhuman realms, thereby challenging anthropocentric notions of care.[21] In her work on speculative feminist care ethics, Maria Puig de la Bellacasa writes that being "in" touch through digital communication technologies, touching through screens and keyboards, provides a "metonymic way to access the lived and fleshy character of involved care relations, [while] the *haptic* holds promises against the primacy of detached vision, a promise of thinking and knowing that is 'in touch' with materiality, touched and touching."[22] While it is not possible or even desirable to scrutinize affective relationships from the supposedly neutral position of the transparent self, in this book we consider what opportunities we still have for writing about such relationships and thus for imagining alternative ways of world-making, working, sharing, and collaborating in light of the physical and affective distance brought about by the pandemic. Here feminist theory becomes a means to question dominating hierarchies and forms of production and subjectivity, even while our own work as

well as our memories and personal pandemic experiences are implicated in these structures.

Although collaborative writing as a scholarly practice is central to this book's investigation of how we touch one another in the time of corona, we also expand beyond an anthropocentric view of touch, considering changing relationships between constructions of self and body, and among people, things, places, and even the virus itself as a physical entity. Love as we deal with it in this book, for example, describes a wider affective register beyond particular historical and cultural conceptions of romantic entanglements.[23] We thus discuss key instances of the COVID-19 pandemic's reconfiguration of relationships across architectural, urban, and digital realities that range from intimate and personal to collective forms of experience.[24]

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For this book, we have chosen a rhythm of writing that allows us to zoom in and out between different scales and problems, and to investigate the use of different metaphors, analogies, temporal regimes, and politicized arguments that sediment the pandemic's spatial, affective, and moral reconfigurations. As a deliberate methodology, our writing together apart makes this book one long, interwoven dialogue in which our individual voices become indistinguishable from each other as we learn to finish each other's thoughts and sentences, turning them into something else in the process. This method becomes a means to look beyond our individual desires and longings. Yet the pandemic creates dependencies and entrapments that are both structural and highly personal and subjective. In this book, we explore these dependencies and entrapments, examining them from within. We explore the injustices, as well as the opportunities for thinking differently that emerge. Responding to entrapments is not simply a call for freedom, but involves a much wider range of human emotions and practices, including love, care, and an acceptance of vulnerability.

Throughout the book we consider the broader horizon of current political debate, where urgent global issues such as climate change and migration – which in their own ways also challenge our understandings of coexistence, dependency, solidarity, care, and human and ecological vulnerability – are pushed into the background, while at the same time the pandemic becomes a projection screen for abundant utopias as well as dystopias. The media reports of wildlife returning as the world slowed its pace during the first lockdowns might be seen as a hopeful sign of a more sustainable future for the globe – even as the virus may also strengthen political agendas that thrive on people's

fears of the other and their view that anything beyond their own borders is dangerous. Yet, as the pandemic forces us to rethink our relationships, how we touch and are touched by others, and our own frail position in the world as human beings, we dare to share the hope that it will also enable us to at least imagine a more just, considerate, and compassionate future.

1 The Digital Hug: Love and Care from a Distance

We need to remember the "press" in an impression. It allows us to associate the experience of having an emotion with the very affect of one surface upon another, an affect that leaves its mark or trace. So not only do I have an impression of others, but they also leave me with an impression.[25]

I look into my dad's ear. The image is grainy and pixelated on my phone. Speaking loudly, I try to explain that he should hold the phone in front of him so I can see his face. "What is grandpa doing?" my daughter chimes in. He finally manages to hold the screen somewhat steady in front of him. The lighting in his room at the nursing home is not adjusted for online streaming, and my dad seems unfamiliar with the best influencer angles from which to film oneself, so the image looks grainy, and his face remains in shadow. But at least we can see his silhouette, and he responds in the affirmative when asked if he can see us. I ask about his day, and he tells me in a hushed voice that he went for a walk in the churchyard next to the nursing home, where he met up with his girlfriend of twelve years, who still lives in her own apartment a couple of blocks down the road: "We sat at either end of a bench to keep a distance. No touching, I told her. But it was nice seeing her. I had thought perhaps I was never going to do that again." (KV)

Although we may sense the outline of a pen if it is placed on our palm, we get a different sensation of its shape, texture, and weight if we move our hand, grasp the pen between our fingers, run our fingertips along its edges. Haptic sensing differs from other senses such as seeing and hearing in that it is bidirectional, meaning that it is dependent on movement. Haptic sensing involves not only tactile cues from the stimulation of sensors in the skin that signal contact with an object (pen on palm), but also kinesthetic information from sensors in muscles, tendons, and joints that send signals about the movement of our limbs and the force used (grasping, weighing the pen).[26] So when Sara Ahmed in the epigraph above evokes "the press in an impression" as she reflects on the affective impact of emotions, it is notable that the imagery she uses comes from haptic experience: the movement of something being pressed against something else, with a degree of force that leaves an imprint. Significantly, for Ahmed, "others do not have to be nearby to make or leave an impression."[27]

This spatial imagery evokes something pushing outward in the world, and other material retracting, containing. *Movement* is the key, whether spatially or affectively. In her book on haptics, Lynette Jones – a researcher at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's department of mechanical engineering, whose work develops tactile, haptic, and thermal displays – reminds us that "in the act of exploring an object we may even change its properties, such as when

Figure 1: Graphic symbols/icons/pictograms describing digital gestures illustrating the way we touch screens. Image Credit: Macrovector/Shutterstock.com

we exert too much force on a ripe strawberry and crush it, permanently altering its shape."[28] *Touching and being touched*, in the sense with which we are concerned in this book, is about reaching out and reacting to that which pushes itself against us. It is a double movement that binds entities together and has potential to alter those involved: leaving marks or traces, or furthering a healing process,[29] in either case changing the state of that with which we engage. It is about *more* than one surface interfacing with another, in the same sense in which haptic sensing is about *more* than tactile cues – skin on skin, skin on screen – but involves the whole situated moving body (muscles, tendons, joints, and all) conditioned by geographical, intersectional structures and a particular emotional and psychological orientation. Touch releases the hormone oxytocin, which is believed to be related to trust and social bonding.[30] Yet the way touch is experienced is conditioned by things such as temperature, force, and velocity,[31] as well as by our previous experiences, and by the person who is touching us.[32] Indeed, studies show that humans can detect emotions such as anger, fear, disgust, love, gratitude, and sympathy when a stranger touches them on the skin of their arm, even if they do not see the touch.[33] Moreover, people react differently to human touch and machine touch.[34]

Touch can result in tactile and kinesthetic as well as emotional stimuli. So what happens when, in the time of corona, physical touch becomes potentially contagious and therefore needs to be limited? Certainly, many people touch surfaces less; they touch each other less. Yet we find ways to touch and be touched, to move others and create movement within ourselves, despite our isolation and the reduction in our number of contacts with other people. It can be argued that the pandemic hit at a technological point when our ability to reach others without physically engaging with them was unprecedented. The pandemic has shown just how much social life is able to continue without our moving away from the screen to go to other places. However, it has also made visible the painful rifts between those who are sufficiently privileged to be able to stay at home during lockdown and those who have to face the virus as they work in hospitals, clean potentially infected surfaces across the city, keep supply routes open, or deliver the goods bought online by fearful or bored citizens whose main interlocutor is digital media. Who has time to post about the virus and the tedium of quarantine on Facebook? Who has less time to explore online social gatherings because they are multitasking, simultaneously "working from home" and taking care of children or elderly family members? Who is at increased risk of loneliness and isolation? What opportunities do we have to forge new intimate relationships – with lovers and friends – and how is the love that

Figure 2: In April 2020 Facebook added the care reaction emoji, giving Facebook users the option to react to posts with a digital hug. Image Credit: rvlsoft / Shutterstock.com

knits together families and communities affected when people are unable to travel or convene in public spaces, and when self-isolation is recommended for many groups? As for our booming digital lives, they take part in turning the last forty years of work in the field of human-computer interaction into critical everyday experiences and experiments.

As the first lockdowns wore on or were reinstated (and indeed, whenever a lockdown is lifted and the prospect of a new one surfaces), the initial relief that surprisingly many things can be dealt with remotely turned into a sensation of the limits of interacting with others on online platforms. It was as if the digital amplified the longing for the tactile. This seemed particularly acute when the need arose to comfort, console, or share grief. As artist and cultural theorist Emily Rosamond notes in a lecture from 2015 on digital intimacy, tangible space, and the experience of losing a close family member: "In the face of all this – in the face of death – a digital hug has no currency. It is not adequate to the weight of the burden which must be shared."³⁵ For Rosamond, a digital hug is somehow too light; there is not enough pressure on the skin to make an *impression*. When she lost a close family member, she therefore chose to travel in order to *be present* at the funeral. This opportunity was not available during the COVID-19 lockdowns, which meant that in the face of death, anxiety, and stress, people had to find ways of making a digital hug suffice. Facebook visualized the hug with its "care" emoji, introduced in April 2020 to enable people to show support during the crisis. Amid the ultra-short movement contained in a reaction emoji, a smiley clasps its small yellow arms tightly around a red heart. This is the first Facebook reaction emoji that is not just a facial expression or a symbol: it gives the smiley bodily features, and gestures toward a haptic experience that involves movement of the arms, and a body touching someone else's heart. The digital hug is the key scenario in this first chapter, which is about the ways – and costs – of making a digital hug suffice and creating intimacy at a distance. That is, this chapter concerns the limitations of and opportunities for expressing the caring emotional directionality toward others that characterizes close relationships when physical encounters are restricted and play out digitally. Centering on *touch as movement* and the mapping of interaction, we look at the use of dating apps and mental health apps during spring 2020, as well as the introduction of contact tracing apps – a kind of reverse dating app – to chart the temporal and spatial structures of intimacy and the points of contact among people, and between people and technology.

Figure 3: "Le Pays de Tendre" (1800), originally created by Madeleine de Scudéry in 1653–1654. Image Credit: Cornell University – PJ Mode Collection of Persuasive Cartography

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To understand the intermingling of emotions, bodies, and screens in light of the different forms of social distancing brought about by the pandemic, it is worth taking a step back and situating our immediate experience in a larger cultural-historical trajectory. A noteworthy early rendition of the relationship between emotion and movement is the famous seventeenth-century Carte de Tendre, which mediates the experience of intimacy and love as a journey by imagining affective states on a geographical map. It is believed that the Carte de Tendre was conceived in Paris during the winter of 1653–1654 as a social game and collective project among the female intellectual circle of society hostess Catherine de Vivonne, marquise de Rambouillet.[36] The map was subsequently integrated as an engraving (attributed to François Chauveau) into the novel *Clélie* (1654–1661) by Madeleine de Scudéry, a writer of romances who was part of Vivonne's circle. Satirized by Molière in *Les Précieuses ridicules* (1659), this circle was a literary salon of educated women for whom love and courtship were cherished objects of attention and debate. However, it has since been argued that the map can also be read as a riposte to the seventeenth-century military cartography of French scientists and engineers. In this reading, the Carte de Tendre as a collective feminist project reconfigures the political into the intimate personal realm, exploring the nuances of relationships not only between men and women, but also between king and subject, authority and subservience, freedom and obligation.[37]

The Carte de Tendre charts the possible paths from new encounters (represented by the city of Nouvelle Amitié, "new friendship") via the River of Inclination, which flows directly toward the city Tendre-sur-Inclination, but is surrounded by perils such as the flat Lac d'Indifférence ("lake of indifference"), La Mer Dangereuse ("the dangerous sea"), which is full of cliffs, and the unruly waters of Mer d'Inimitié ("the sea of enmity"), where a ship is struggling to keep afloat. Small villages adorn the route on land, designating flirtation techniques such as the Billet Doux and Billet Galant ("love notes"), or emotive states such as Empressement ("eagerness") or Complaisance ("desire to please"). The route on land may also lead to the two larger riverside cities of Reconnaissance ("recognition") and Estime ("esteem"), modes of tenderness reached by more laborious paths. The map is thus a complex charting of an emotional landscape where affective sensibilities take geographical and infrastructural form. As visual arts scholar Giuliana Bruno aptly notes, "the Carte de Tendre makes a world of affects visible to us. In its design, grown out of an amorous journey, the

Figure 4: Rendering of Catherine de Vivonne, Marquise de Rambouillet. France, nineteenth century. Image Credit © 2021. White Images/Scala, Florence

exterior world conveys an interior landscape. Emotion materializes as a moving topography. To traverse that land is to visit the ebb and flow of a personal and yet social psychogeography."[38] We can speculate about how a map that took account of the pandemic's regulation of touching and being touched would look. Would it be a dating app, or a contact tracing app? Would it encourage intimacy or distance? Love and courtship might have changed considerably since the seventeenth century, but we are no less occupied by the attempt to chart our emotions; we even automate our ability to register them through emotion detection technology. As a projection screen for the personal yet social, the Carte de Tendre is an apt reminder to think about the interfaces through which we engage with lovers and loved ones during quarantine, curfew, or lockdown. Historical maps such as the Carte de Tendre, understood as "exemplary tools in the articulation of new attitudes, exposing controversial states of social awareness,"[39] remind us to look for the political implications embedded in the everyday technologies that help to reconfigure our intimate sphere today – the social sorting and intrinsic biases that are part of the configuration of digital intimacy. Maps today are predominantly digital and interactive; they chart our movements, and they predict where we want to go. Geolocation features on dating apps facilitate online conversations or physical meetings. Most of these devices chart our emotions in some way – less as a moving topography captured through the art of mapmaking, and more in the language of metadata. Statistically speaking, how many times do we exchange messages on Tinder before meeting in person? How far are we willing to travel to meet a potential lover? The experience of communicating through a screen becomes a dynamic metadata map, ripe for data analysis.

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If we look at the statistics regarding online dating during the first round of COVID-19 lockdowns in early 2020 (which started and ended on different dates in different countries), it is notable that many dating services reported an increase in the length of conversations, even though Match Group's (the company behind Tinder and OkCupid) stocks tumbled twenty-five percent when the prospects looked gloomy for products designed to facilitate physical meetings. Yet, despite these dire conditions, Tinder reported that its users worldwide made three million swipes on Sunday, March 29, 2020, the greatest number of swipes the app had ever registered in a single day. In the UK, daily conversations rose by twelve percent between mid-February and the end of March; in the US, conversations during the pandemic were twenty-five percent longer than normal.

Inner Circle reported that the number of messages being sent increased by 116 percent, and OkCupid noted a twenty percent rise in conversations, while Hornet saw a thirty percent increase in social feed engagement.[40] There was also an increase in video dates[41]: Hinge rolled out a "Date from Home" option that allowed users to start a video chat; Plenty of Fish introduced the opportunity to livestream with potential matches; Bumble, which had offered video calls as an option since 2019, saw a ninety-three percent rise in video calling during the week after the then US President Donald Trump declared a national emergency.[42] In the second week of April 2020, Match.com surveyed its users about changed habits during the pandemic: while only six percent had used video chats before COVID-19, now sixty-nine percent responded that they were open to video chatting.[43] Communication studies scholar Stefanie Duguay has noted that platforms such as Her and Lex encouraged acts of care and self-care by promoting safety.[44] When meeting strangers physically becomes fraught with fear, longer online conversations, with or without images, seem an obvious choice. In the *New York Times,* Helen Fisher, Match.com's chief scientific adviser, called for "slow love," arguing for the benefits of people getting to know each other online before meeting in person, and thus turning what might have appeared to be a threat to the dating industry into an opportunity to transform the culture of fast, fleeting love that the industry is often accused of stimulating.[45]

Temporally, then, the journey along the River of Inclination depicted on the Carte de Tendre may have become longer and slower during lockdown and quarantine; but the ability to make a digital hug suffice becomes even more pertinent. How to trigger the release of oxytocin when no human touch is involved? How to move yourself under lockdown? Maps on dating apps that display geolocation are normally a matching criterion as well as a warranting feature that serves to reassure users that there is a real physical person behind a given online profile.[46] Yet these maps' function of linking physical bodies to digital profiles relates to practices that have now become constrained due to the pandemic. It simply seems less relevant whether the person you are talking to is ten miles or a hundred miles away. Some platforms responded by making features that are normally subscriber-only free to everyone. For example, Tinder's "passport" allows users to match and chat to people in different locations than their own. It works somewhat like a virtual trip, insofar as it allows you to select a new location and interact with matches in your new (virtual) vicinity; during spring 2020, online dating with people in remote places provided a rare opportunity to "travel." Happn, the app that matches people based on whether their paths have crossed in real life, extended the radius so that users could match

with people within 120 kilometers. Such changes may explain why many dating apps saw increased matching and messaging but less willingness to pay for subscriber features while countries were under lockdown, although the latter increased again as lockdowns lifted.[47] Indeed, as film and digital media scholar Diego Semerene argues: "So much cruising, so little sex: from the question, 'What do you want to do to me?' as a strategy to fish for words that, unlike the body, can hit the fantasy at its heart, to the exposition of exhaustive scenarios of how the sexual encounter should take place even though, or precisely because, it never will."[48] Because the physical encounter is prohibited, the touch has to be conjured from the words that can be exchanged.

What is interesting here in relation to the interlinking of touch, movement, and intimacy is that although many dating platforms do not seem to have increased their user numbers during lockdowns (unlike online meeting platforms such as Zoom), there has been a change in how those who already had the apps use them during the pandemic: users engage in longer conversations online, rather than short interactions, because moving and touching now have to take place on the platform. The map of tender of the pandemic is thus one that is measured temporally and charted in metadata, rather than manifesting emotion as topography as in the Carte de Tendre. What we see in the statistics about the use of dating apps is not motion through a landscape, but an exteriorization of the development of emotions, measured in time spent interacting with someone. Notably, in this process the need for knowing that we are interacting with another human and not a chatbot seemingly becomes less important. Indeed, digital technologies may be better equipped to perform digital hugs than humans.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

Some of the apps that did increase their user numbers push the limits of what a digital hug can mean, insofar as the interlocutor is precisely what many dating app users normally fear: chatbots. While this was already a growing market before lockdown, the worldwide quarantines increased the popularity of artificial-intelligence-driven chatbots that use natural language processing and machine learning to have conversations with users and offer emotional support. The mental health app Wysa saw a seventy-seven percent increase in new users during February and March.[49] Wysa is the first artificial intelligence mental health app to meet the clinical safety standards of the UK's National Health Service, and it was recommended by the health app evaluation and advice organization ORCHA as the best app for COVID-19 stress and anxiety. The app

relies on techniques such as cognitive behavioral therapy, meditation, and motivational interviewing, but it also offers the opportunity to contact real-life mental health professionals (for a fee). It was developed as part of a project to get machine learning models to help with the detection of depression. This project found it difficult to persuade people to accept help from a therapist, even when depression was detected, but the chatbot feature became surprisingly popular.[50] Wysa is careful to stress that it is not meant to replace human therapists.[51] Nevertheless, apps such as these seem to respond to the need to share your thoughts and have them reflected back to you, and they provide a format where this is possible without your having to sit opposite a therapist. However, with these apps we also tap into a growing research field that emphasizes the intersectional biases in machine learning,[52] and this reminds us that just as we (unlike Molière) should not write off the Carte de Tendre as the product of a group of privileged, educated women with nothing better to do than muse about love and flirtation, so dating apps and mental well-being apps are far from innocent and benign, and should be accorded serious scholarly attention.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

In her reflections on digital intimacy and the impetus to share as something that has transactional value, Rosamond compares dating apps to an older technology: eighteenth-century British literature. It has been argued that this literature developed characters with complex interior lives in response to the introduction of overseas commodities, which challenged people to make items from far beyond their horizons into private possessions, meaning in turn that interiority became a form of commerce. Rosamond tentatively argues: "Perhaps I could suggest that online dating avatars are like literary characters, producing commerce of shared feeling and/or shared interests between readers and characters – except that all of the readers are also characters, and all of the characters are also readers."[53] Many chatbots seem indeed to operate through this logic, facilitating a feeling that we – by sharing our vulnerabilities with the persona – cocreate a character that we in turn commission to listen to us.

A very popular chatbot is Microsoft's XiaoIce, a virtual teenager that ranks among China's celebrities.[54] XiaoIce was launched in China in 2014, and had 660 million active users in 2019.[55] Li Zhou, Jianfeng Gao, Di Li, and Heung-Yeung Shum from Microsoft Research have charted how a user's emotional connection with XiaoIce builds over a two-month period: from exploring her features and functions, asking questions such as "Are you human?" and "What functions do you have?" in the first session; talking to XiaoIce about hobbies

and interests in session six, after two weeks; starting to treat the bot as a friend and bringing in the user's personal life after four weeks, in session twenty; talking to the bot almost every day after seven weeks, around session forty-two. After two further weeks, around session seventy-one, XiaoIce is the user's preferred choice when they want to talk to someone.[56] These bots' ability to establish intimate bonds with individual users reveals that technology can provide emotional support by being much more available than any "real-life" friend would be. In these cases, a digital hug carried out by technology seems to suffice, and sometimes even to exceed a physical hug, because it is so much more readily available. We see here how the mapping at work in the interaction with XiaoIce plays out in a temporal register: it is the duration and intensity of the interval in the interaction that administers the *press* in the impression invoked by these apps. A sense of proximity arises from an increased ability to interact and share. At the same time as health authorities around the world identify physical proximity as a risk factor in the spread of coronavirus, particularly over time, we find other ways of moving ourselves emotionally and being in proximity with others – human or nonhuman.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

During the pandemic, a new range of apps also arrived: the contact tracing and health code apps that prescribe who can move around and who needs to stay in quarantine. These apps map and administer distance and intimacy alike, often with duration of proximity as the key factor. In many countries they have become deeply ingrained as a way of managing and controlling movements and relationships.

Not surprisingly, the public debate and rhetoric around the use of these apps to manage both the population and the disease mimic existing discourses, debates, and sentiments about technology and tracking in various regions of the world. Reports about China's health code app quickly sparked privacy concerns, with the *New York Times* calling it "a troubling precedent for automated social control."[57] China introduced the app in response to the reopening of cities in February 2020, and the codes were added to the mobile payment platforms Alipay (partly owned by the tech giant Alibaba) and WeChat (owned by another tech giant, Tencent).[58] The codes function somewhat like health passports, determining your ability to travel and enter certain places. Although the app is individually adapted in different Chinese provinces, a green QR code generally means you can move around with no restrictions, while a yellow code designates some form of home isolation, and a red code means quarantine. The latter

Figure 5: The Chinese health code app initiated at the beginning of the pandemic and criticized (for instance, in the *New York Times*) for its automation of social control. As shown on this picture, the app works through a QR code that can be scanned by another person, e.g. on a smartphone. A year later, Denmark launched its own "corona passport," restricting access to restaurants, museums, etc. Image Credit: Private Photo / Ting Huang

two codes are assigned to people who have been in contact with an infected person, visited an area with many infected people, or reported symptoms. The *New York Times* reported that each time a code is scanned, the location is sent to the system's servers, enabling the tracking of movement over time.[59]

The exact criteria according to which the codes are assigned remain opaque, generating critique from users who feel their color code is arbitrary. Nonetheless, the codes are used to guide movement through cities and prohibit contact with others – quickly becoming an entry pass to public transit as well as hotels, restaurants, and shops.

Apart from privacy concerns, and the fear that the code system may remain in place and be integrated into future smart city developments, there has also been significant concern because the elderly, who are particularly vulnerable in terms of health, are less likely as a socioeconomic group to own or be able to operate a smartphone.[60] The usefulness of these apps – not unlike dating apps – is dependent on the number of users who install it, which in turn is dependent on political structures and popular sentiment. In India, the app Aarogya Setu (meaning "the bridge for liberation from the disease") had more than fifty million installations in the first thirteen days, overtaking Pokémon Go to become the world's fastest-growing mobile app.[61] After four weeks it was made mandatory for all workers in the public as well as private sectors, as is the use of similar apps in Indonesia, Vietnam, and Qatar.[62] Other countries, where the use of such apps is still voluntary, struggle to get citizens to participate, due partly to privacy concerns and partly to perceptions of the apps' effectiveness. The role of the multinational tech giants in the rollout of app-based solutions to disease control deserves a whole study of its own: the topic speaks to the geopolitical negotiation of movement in a global pandemic that nation-states are seeking to alleviate. While most apps are designed nationally and developed as part of disease control strategies within the boundaries of the nation-state, a key decision has to be made regarding whether the data architecture should be centralized – in which case the data is uploaded to a server controlled by the government health authority – or decentralized, in which case it is stored locally on users' devices. Significantly, Apple and Google partnered up in spring 2020 to enable a decentralized approach, which came to be seen as more secure and less problematic in terms of privacy. While it may at first sound paradoxical that big tech is better attuned to privacy concerns than governments, various scandals have taught these companies how dependent they are on users adopting the technology. The companies' more economically motivated approach may therefore focus on mitigating users' concerns in order not to lose customers. As global rather than nationally available technologies, these apps tap into surveil-

lance-capitalist modes of thinking about data as a noninvasive resource ripe for extraction. Coupled with disease control, this makes the choice to "opt out" all the more ambivalent: after all, who does not want to help stop the pandemic? At the same time, the door is also left open to a host of uncertainties pertaining to the risk of false positives (for instance, the app cannot see if there are barriers in place that prohibit contamination) or false negatives (for instance, unlike GPS, Bluetooth cannot detect that you have entered a space that an infected person just left) and thus to the usefulness of these apps for anything other than data collection.

However, these apps arguably perform a form of affective mapping that is akin to the Carte de Tendre, except that they are less focused on developing amorous feelings and more on managing the fear of being contaminated by others. Contact tracing apps emphasize geography in a different way than the dating apps and mental health apps on which, according to behavioral statistics, people spend more time talking to each other during lockdowns. Temporality is also a key marker in the mapping performed by contact tracing apps insofar as the duration of an interaction is essential for the estimation of risk. Moreover, these apps use physical proximity as a matching criterion, in a similar way to dating apps' use of geolocation, although here the "dating" takes place between anonymized phone IDs rather than appealingly filtered profile photos. In Europe, various contact tracing apps have been modeled on forms of partner notification that have been used (in the UK, for instance) to anonymously inform individuals that they have been named as a previous sexual partner by someone who has contracted a sexually transmitted infection, and that they should therefore get tested. However, while we can assume that most people usually have some idea of who they have had sex with and can narrow it down to a fixed list whose phone numbers can be found, the ephemeral nature of the touch of coronavirus means that we are far more incalculable in terms of spreading the disease, and much less likely to know to whom we might have passed it on. The solution in many of the apps – and the technology that Apple and Google joined forces to implement – exploits what Wendy Chun has identified as the "chatty" and "promiscuous"[63] qualities of networked devices by using Bluetooth to log other phones that come within a certain distance. These apps aim to ease privacy concerns by storing the information locally on the individual device rather than in a central database, and by not saving location data. The decentralized infrastructure means that health authorities do not have the option to perform big data analyses and map outbreaks geographically. Yet for the individual phones, the identification of geographical proximity is essential to create an "event" that is stored in the

system. A constant negotiation of individual and collective experiences of people and devices, nation-states and multinational companies, is thus at the core of the contact tracing app as a cultural technique for disease management insofar as the app is simultaneously both deeply personal (hence the host of privacy concerns) and fundamentally supra-individual.[64]

This blurring of the individual and societal body is also recognizable in questions concerning immunization. Of course, the question of whether immunity can emerge in the population is dependent upon whether individuals' immune systems have responded to the virus after contracting the disease or being vaccinated: it pertains to concrete bodies that have either been touched by pathogens or received an appropriate vaccine dose. Immunity in this sense lowers the individual's risk of contracting the disease or becoming fatally ill, but it also means that the individual takes part in a collective effort to achieve herd immunity, thereby lowering the general risk of infection. Thus, immunization is almost a tradable good, embodied in altercations about access to sufficient vaccines between nation-states, institutions, and interest groups, as well as in stories of people who consciously seek exposure to the virus, e.g. at COVID parties or the like.[65] This is also reflected in "corona passports": any sign that one's body cannot pass on the disease – whether demonstrated by a negative test result, or by antibodies from one's having previously contracted COVID or received a vaccine – can become a gateway across national borders, or simply to access to restaurants, cafes, hairdressers, etc.

Indeed, the experience of being part of a gigantic invisible network is palpable when you download one of these apps. For instance, the interface of the Danish app Smittestop ("contamination stop") shows a green pulsating circle. It notifies you if you have spent more than fifteen minutes within one meter of someone who has subsequently turned out to be COVID-19 positive. There is no swiping or interaction involved – it works invisibly on its own, in the background – and unlike most other apps, you receive no dopamine reward from notifications. The only way to interact with the app is to press the green circle to stop the monitoring, in which case the circle turns red. The feeling of security it provides thus operates not at the individual but at the collective level: it gives the individual the sensation of playing a role in a crisis that otherwise offers very little room for individuals to contribute on a larger scale and make an *impression*. The digital hug here is the light touching of two UHF radio shortwaves sent from two different devices, registering and logging each other's presence in local databases, creating vast personal social networks that (unlike the social media we sign up to) are not meant to be seen and traced back to specific

Figure 6: The interface of the Danish app Smittestop. Image Credit: The Danish Ministry of Health

geographies. It seems like a radical version of the Situationists' psychogeographical practice of liberating the urban fabric by creating alternative mappings. Paradoxically, the invisibility of these mappings makes them all the more powerful. They remain notably uninterested in psychology or the idea that individuals and technological systems may have intentions or desires; rather, individuals are simply potential carriers of the virus in a massive digitally linked network. The need for a digital hug has thus been transformed into a gigantic, chatty and digitally promiscuous societal squeeze.
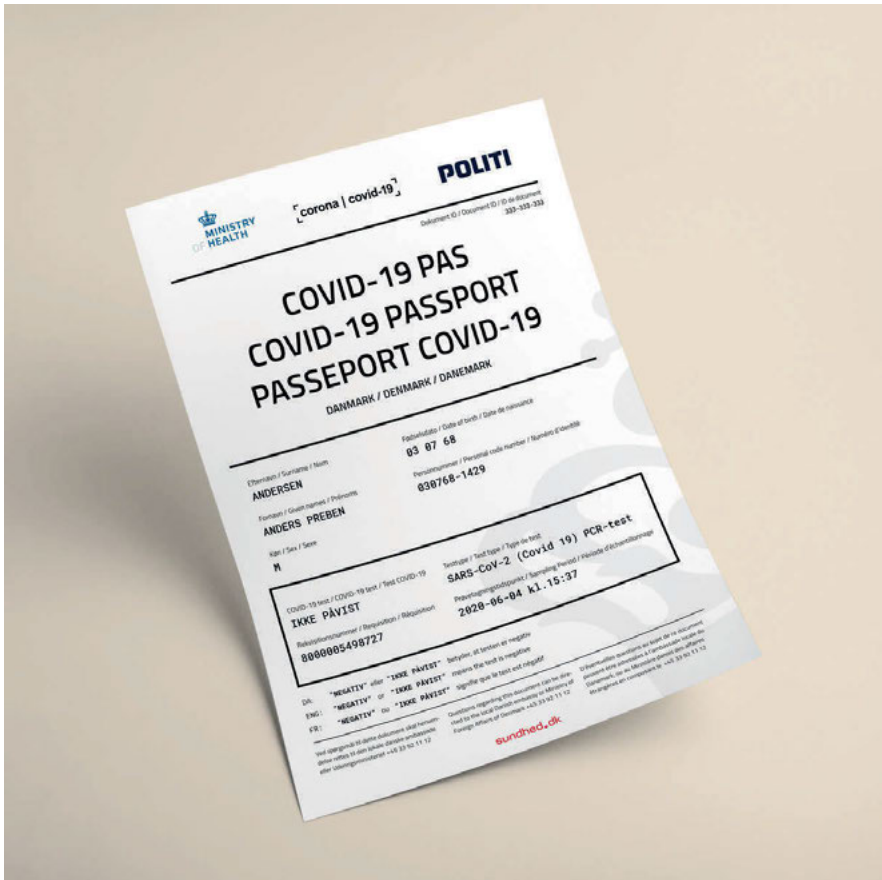
Figure 7: Example of a Danish corona passport. Image Credit: Sundhed.dk

2 On the Politics of Face Masks: A Danish Example

> Inadmissible information is often information that has something to do with biology (ill-ness, sex, reproduction) or money (poverty) or violence (how money and bodies meet). In-admissible information might also have to do with being defanged by power (courts, bosses, fathers, editors, and other authorities) or behaving against power in such a way that one soon will be defanged (crime).[66]

> I made curtains for my son out of a colorful fabric to block out the morning sun from his bedroom. It was late May 2020. I was sitting outside our house in the afternoon sun, sewing, feeling as if I was taking part in a scene that belonged to a different century. I also made a face mask for my daughter. Beams of sunlight reflected off the needle as it pierced the fabric's teddy bear and pink flower motifs. She is three years old. Everything has to be pink. She asks if she will have to wear the mask when she is finally able to visit her self-isolating grandparents again. When I try on the mask, my glasses fog up, and it leaves me with an unflattering choice between a foggy (glasses on) or blurry (glasses off) view of the world. (HS)

The German cultural theorist Bernhard Siegert has proposed the concept of *cultural technique* to replace the classical understanding of media. The concept of cultural technique understands media in terms of the relational and ontologi-cal properties of things. It sees objects and things such as grids, filters, and doors as media in terms of what they do with us, not what they process or how. This notion of cultural technique emphasizes the ontological status of such objects as in-betweens – as media in the concrete sense, where ontological dis-tinctions are dissolved and replaced by understandings of relationships, pro-cesses, effects, and dependencies.[67]

Fabric can be seen as a cultural technique in times of corona. It is used to protect, reassure, curate, shield, separate, and create distance, notably in the form of face masks and other protective clothing, as well as in curtains, and in the marquees used for testing or as extensions of hospital and care facilities. We can interpret these structures and their media representations in light of their global ubiquity and similarity, whereby they become concrete markers of the pandemic by bringing it into visibility. But they are contested symbols, as evinced by the deep divisions around face masks in the US, for example, or the hesitant adoption of face masks in several Western European countries.[68] As the pandemic has worn on, positions have polarized amid abundant conspiracy

Vos Creditis, als eine fabel,
quod scribitur von Doctor schnabel,
der fugit die Contagion
et außert seinen Lohn darvon,
Cadavera sucht er zu frißen,
gleich wie der Corvus auf der Mißten,
Ah Credite, ziehet nicht dort hin,
dann ROMÆ regnat die Peftin.

Quis non deberet sehr erschrecken
für seiner Virgul oder stecken,
qua loquitur, als wär er stumm,
und deutet sein Consilium.
Wie mancher Credit ohne zweyfel
das ihm tentir ein schwartzen Teuffel
Marsupium heißt seine Höll,
und aurum die geholte Seel.

I. Columbina, ad vivum delineavit.   Paulus Fürst. Excud.

Figure 8: Copper engraving by Paulus Fürst, after a tablet from 1656 by J. Columbina. During the plague, doctors tried to distance themselves from physical interactions with their patients. This image shows the plague doctor Doktor Schnabel. The long beak contained herbs to filter polluted air, which was believed to be the medium of contagion. Image Credit: Enrique Meseguer / Pixabay

theories: face masks are sometimes seen as a sign of complacency, of citizens being sheep that fail to question their government's authority to impose restrictions, institute rules to prevent contamination, or recommend vaccines.[69] Yet if we take a step back from the immediate context of COVID-19, we can see the pandemic's fabric architectures and clothing as part of a long history of medical architectures that separate patients with contagious diseases from other groups in society – a history that goes back to ancient times. Just think of the notorious plague doctors of early modernity, who wore beak-like masks, or the many purpose-built and quickly erected pandemic hospitals, e.g. during cholera outbreaks or the 1918–1920 flu pandemic.

Nonetheless, the face mask is about more than just function or protection; it provokes conflicting interpretations. In Denmark in 2020, public health authorities and the general public underwent a general change of heart in their attitude to face masks – from panic over a lack of resources, to dismissal, to a gradual embrace of face masks in light of the late summer's sudden increase in infection numbers. This chapter tells the story of that change of heart, as an example of what the changing politics of pandemic architectures and accessories can tell us about how political responses to the pandemic, and people's reactions to them, are highly situated and dependent on specific relationships and understandings. Relationships and understandings that are highly *politicized* involve measures that *discipline* individuals but are *experienced affectively*. In this way, the touch of a mask's fabric on the skin offers a vehicle to explore different dimensions of *touching and being touched* both physically and affectively. The chapter unfolds from the onset of the pandemic in Denmark in late February 2020 up until mid-August of that year, when face masks were made mandatory on public transit nationwide for the first time – a watershed moment in the national acceptance of face masks, which later also became mandatory in shops, supermarkets, public institutions, etc.

As media, fabric objects and architectures, such as face masks and COVID-19 testing marquees, are coded in particular ways as they perform roles for, with, and toward humans, as well as in relation to viral pathogens. This means that they act as affective markers that negotiate the emotional makeup of the pandemic, making it visible, coding and changing how bodies move and perform in spaces such as health centers, public transit, or open spaces. Fabric – a relatively lightweight material, even in its heavily coated variants – is readily accessible and can be shaped into many types of objects at many scales. Its weave can prevent or facilitate the mediated penetration of light, air, or viral particles, for example. The production of fabric-based objects can be

Figure 9: US naval hospital: a general view of inner buildings and influenza emergency camps. Mare Island, California, October 12, 1918. Image Credit: Navy Medicine from Washington, DC, US / Wikimedia Commons

industrialized and mechanized, or it can require highly specialized skills, or simple forms of craft that are available to anyone with a needle and thread. In any case, fabric-based objects act on and with spatial structures in relation to different scales of intimacy. Just think of the way the mask touches the skin of the face, impacts breathing, and involves particular routines of applying, removing, discarding, washing, or airing the mask itself. Or think of the way fabric is used to demarcate spaces of separation, or to create new purpose-built pandemic architectures for treatment or testing where potential illness is forcedly separated off in tent-like structures. Those structures have become a looming, iconic presence in cities and parking lots, around hospitals and health centers, and in new, intensified border control situations that may also involve COVID-19 testing. Hastily erected marquees or temporary treatment centers – just like the emergency treatment facilities seen in images from the Spanish flu pandemic – insist on the urgency as well as the fleeting nature of the crisis, exuding a cruel optimism akin to the tent infrastructures of refugees' or emergency workers' camps,[70] and with the same political investment in marking dominance or authority through seemingly neutral, white, compound-like structures.[71] Thus, fabric as a medium in the time of corona raises questions about the virus's economic, affective, political, and ecological implications, as well as about how the pathogen gains an inverse visibility in media and cities, touching and directing people and bodies.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

July 26, 2020 saw the first media reports of a shift in Danish public health recommendations about face masks,[72] which had hitherto been ruled out. From having been a practically nonexistent pandemic accessory in the country, on July 31 face masks were recommended as a "good idea" on rush hour public transit.[73] Then, on August 15, face masks were made mandatory for all public transit users and personnel.

During the early days of the pandemic, face masks had become a symbol of resourcing problems at hospitals, health clinics, and care homes. For the first six months, however, the Danish authorities insisted that wearing masks in public was not an effective measure. The health authority stated that although masks had some documented effect in laboratory settings, there was insufficient evidence that they would reduce the spread of the disease in public spaces, meaning that there was no basis on which to recommend them; indeed, the authorities even seemed to warn against face masks.[74] During the early phase of

Figure 10: A COVID-19 testing facility and drive-through on the grounds of Skejby Hospital. Aarhus, Denmark, June 8, 2020. Image Credit: Alexanderstock23 / Shutterstock.com

the pandemic, a two-meter distance rule was in place, everyone was advised to use a handkerchief or sleeve if they had to cough or sneeze, and people with symptoms were advised to stay at home. It was argued that face masks would be an unnecessary addition, and that they might be counterproductive.[75] In an article dated May 31, 2020, Henning Bundgaard, a scientist, professor, and consultant at Copenhagen University Hospital, emphasized that laboratory studies only gave so much information about everyday life – a comment one might have expected to hear from a humanities scholar rather than a medical doctor. When it came to face masks in public spaces, even this scientist felt compelled to consider the "soft facts" of cultural rhythms and contingencies. He stated that a person wearing a face mask might feel more protected and therefore move closer to other people, or even remove the mask while drinking coffee with a friend (fair enough, one might say, if a meeting involves consuming food or drink), and that such behavior would open a host of possibilities for people to make mistakes, and to disregard other behavioral distance measures introduced to reduce the risk of infection. The slippage he predicted did in fact gradually take place over the summer, although in different ways.

South of the border, in Germany, face masks had been compulsory on public transit since April 22. This meant that people on cross-border trains during the summer of 2020 would put masks on, or take them off, as soon as the train crossed the German-Danish border. In Denmark, where the wearing of masks was noncompulsory, the moral impetus to follow the rules, combined with the uncertainty regarding whether those rules were sensible, was presented as a dissonance between those who wanted to take extra precautions and those who hesitated or even contested the usefulness of face masks. The story developed as a contest between different moral regimes, emphasizing divisions of opinion between those who were considered stubborn by others and those whom others considered overly anxious.[76]

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As Denmark's institutions and public life gradually returned with the easing of lockdown, the summer's low infection rate was a pocket of near-normality, and a person in a face mask was a surprising reminder of the pandemic. There was a sense that people wearing masks in public spaces were either members of a risk group or carriers of the disease.[77] People's *appearance* in public spaces thus looked very different than media reports from other countries. People returning to Denmark from abroad reported on the experience of wearing masks as something exotic, although some said they had become used to wearing them in

shops or restaurants at their holiday destinations relatively quickly.[78] One also wonders whether some of the hesitation in Denmark about introducing certain restrictions, such as social distancing or face masks in restaurants and shops, boiled down to a perception that such measures would impact the positive feelings around production and consumption in an overly negative direction, potentially smothering typical shopping or spending "experiences" in anxiety and thereby limiting people's willingness to spend money to sustain the economy.

On July 9, the recommendations began to change. Along with the debate around the World Health Organization, which officially changed its recommendation in relation to the growing acceptance that the disease is airborne,[79] now it was suggested that face masks should be worn in situations where a person with (confirmed or suspected) COVID-19 was unable to self-isolate – for example, while traveling to hospital or a testing site. Then on July 31, with the prospect of a return to everyday rush hour rhythms after the summer vacation, and with the virus's basic reproduction rate on the rise, there came the recommendation that people should wear face masks on crowded public transit, on a voluntary basis. The public health authority maintained at that point that although the evidence was not always in favor of wearing masks, changing social behavior and the decline of compliance with physical distancing measures meant that masks were "a good idea."[80] This "good idea" vacillated between one interpretation of risk that placed its hope in individual freedom and the moral duty to self-isolate and maintain distancing, and another interpretation that soothed collective anxieties by changing people's appearance in public spaces.

In early August, Denmark's infection rate began to rise again, and face masks on public transit were made mandatory in areas where smaller outbreaks had occurred. Yet at eleven a.m. on August 15, after months during which the prime minister had given no press briefings on the virus at all, a briefing was broadcast on Danish television: the government announced that face masks would be mandatory on public transit all over the country from the next week onward.

The director of the public health authority, the medical doctor Søren Brostrøm, brought a face mask to this press briefing, sewn out of soft gray fabric. He showed the public how to properly apply and remove the mask, instructing them to carry a plastic bag in which to store the mask while they were not wearing it during the day, and to wash or dispose of it in the evening. Proudly boasting of his twenty years' experience as a medical doctor who had worn face masks on a daily basis, he was able to demonstrate all this correctly, with confidence and elegance.[81] Brostrøm also suggested that new if not conclusive scientific evidence had now put paid to the previous fear that masks would change

people's behavior and deter them from complying with distancing and other hygiene measures.

Thus, he withdrew the authorities' previous dismissal of the mask and presented it not just as a *good* idea, but as a very *sensible* idea, indeed as a form *common sense*. As we know, however, the kind of practical judgment needed for an action or form of behavior to be considered commonsensical is precisely the opposite of this: it is self-evident because it grows out of lived experience. In this case, the understanding of what is considered to be self-evident and relevant lived experience changed as the clock struck eleven on a Saturday morning. Moreover, Brostrøm's choice of face mask for the briefing also redeemed fabric masks, which public authorities had previously discounted in favor of surgical masks.[82] Users of public transit now had a week to stock up on face masks before they became mandatory. The press briefing also floated the possibility that masks might become mandatory in other settings, both public and commercial such as supermarkets or doctors' waiting rooms, in the future – as did indeed happen around two months later.

As the politics of face masks changed, so the practices and meanings of masks also changed. As face masks became more common – made mandatory in certain settings, and used as props in public political spectacles such as press briefings – their semantic valorization slid. Moreover, as this slippage played out, the arguments over it became more complex, raising levels of anxiety and division between different moral formations, as well as instituting new norms regarding how to look and behave in public spaces, and about which measures to prevent the spread of disease were deemed more significant than others. Indeed, the mask came to be a marker of whether you adhered to official advice – a symbol, according to conspiracy theorists, of blind trust in authority. The issue of what constituted "inadmissible information" (to evoke this chapter's epigraph) and what was common sense therefore became attached to questions of power and body politics.[83]

<p style="text-align:center">★★★</p>

The COVID-19 virus is often described as an intruder that can be fought and conquered in a battle against its errant and erratic workings.[84] Yet once it has been diffused through our bodies, communities, cities, and countries as a latent presence, we can understand it as a background condition rather than an intruder: a huge, systemic power, like a belief system, or capitalism, or a language. As we learn to "speak corona" through our interactions with the objects,

Figure 11: The head of the Danish health authority, Søren Brostrøm, demonstrates how to put on a face mask at a nationally televised press briefing on August 15, 2020. Image Credit: Mads Claus Rasmussen / Ritzau Scanpix

social rules, and fabrics that serve to shield us from the disease and reduce the risk of infection, this massive institutional transformation also entails a slippage regarding what togetherness and communality in public spaces can mean or look like. Significantly, at a press briefing in February 2021, Søren Brostrøm looked back on all the different measures to which the population had become accustomed over the previous year, referring to his own experience of having to demonstrate how to wear a mask at a press briefing as "transgressive" and even "intimidating."[85] When people start wearing surgical masks in public spaces, there is a sense of two institutional realms melting together. This mixing of spheres is uncomfortable in a healthy and wealthy Western society such as Denmark, where the sick are treated in sterile hospital settings, and where institutions are built of bricks, mortar, and concrete, rather than plexiglass, fabric, or the duct tape on the supermarket floor that marks out the required distance between shoppers.

Fabric thus plays different roles in pandemic architectures, in servitude to our desire to control the pandemic and its impact. Fabric not only has functional value, but also embodies different cultural operations and symbolic, epistemic, and social processes. The fabric can be close to the skin of the face, an extra layer meant to filter the air and cleanse it of infectious agents. In doing so, the mask covers an expressive part of the face, making communication difficult: it muffles sounds and hides facial expressions, creating a sense of anonymity.

In Western Europe, we mainly know the mask as a medical device. In hospital wards, where a sterile environment is required, we are used to seeing doctors behind an extra layer of protective screens – protected, protecting, and anonymized through surgical uniforms, their covered faces signaling a faceless authority, although this is a less powerful institutional covering of the body than police or military helmets and bulletproof vests. Since the onset of the pandemic, hospital workers' skin has borne red marks left by tightly fitting masks worn on long shifts.[86] If they are completely covered in protective clothing, hospital staff sometimes wear printed pictures of their own faces on their chests, to give patients a sense of the appearance of the person they are meeting. In a sense, having one's own photo dangling around one's neck like a giant selfie is a humanizing gesture, indicating the human being behind the cloth-covered creature. Yet there is also is something uncanny and even inappropriate about an unflagging prosthetic paper smile, a frozen emoji performing like a severed limb in the midst of sickness and death.

Before the pandemic, few people would willingly walk the city streets with their faces masked. In particular situations in Western societies – such as illegal

Figure 12: Face masks on the Copenhagen sidewalks. Masks are not only worn but also discarded, becoming pale blue leaves that mix with the autumn colors. Image Credit: Liv Løvetand Rahbek

demonstrations – the covering of an individual's face is meant to symbolize (controversially) the lack of free speech. The recognizability of facial features is prioritized, tied to prevailing moral patterns infused with individualism. In Denmark, for example, it is a legal requirement that people's faces should be bare on political demonstrations, and there is resistance against religious minorities' use of head or face coverings.[87] People generally show their faces in public spaces, whether physical or digital, making their features available for scrutiny by other people as well as by facial recognition algorithms.

The face mask operates on a spectrum between safety and reassurance, and in extreme situations between protection and anonymization. The mask is not a neutral agent, and there are different relationships to take up with it. It can be a fashion item, as when the Austrian hosiery producer Wolford and other high-end brands charge up to several hundred euros for a single mask.[88] Masks can also be imprinted with political statements, such as national flags or divisive political slogans.[89] In softer consumer segments, masks made out of organic cotton, or children's masks with cartoon motifs, complement homemade masks created from carefully chosen pieces of fabric, or improvised masks made out of bandanas, tea towels, or even coffee filters. Moreover, face masks can be used as a humorous gesture. If sown out of washable fabrics such as cotton or silk, the mask suggests a longer lifespan. As with any purchasable product, people can choose a mask to their liking and economic ability. Industrially produced and disposable face masks for use in medicine or the building industry, possibly with various forms of filter, are made from cheap disposable materials, and constitute a new form of visible trash when discarded masks are found on the street. Yet they can still amount to a significant expense for an individual.

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As media, face masks are meant to filter the air. Their primary function in public space is to minimize the release of respiratory droplets and aerosols by individuals. People can pass on the disease before they show symptoms. Moreover, a proportion of people infected with COVID-19 show few or no symptoms, and hence can be infected without knowing it; but they can still spread the disease through droplets and aerosols by sneezing, coughing, speaking, singing, or even just breathing into the air. Needless to say, human beings share the air, which is needed to sustain life and enable audible communication. Air is the medium that needs to be purified by a fabric that touches the skin, covering the

Figure 13: Male artists challenge the use of masks, for example by using women's underwear. Danish rapper Orgi-E wearing G-string panties as a mask in his music video "Blæstegnen," and German artist Rolls Rolf Langhans with a face mask made from a lacy bra. Image Credit: Universal Music Denmark / Orgi-E and Tessa, Private Photo / Hubert Bergmann

nose and mouth. The mask is a medium that dutifully performs this task, as far as its fit and its density of woven threads allow. It is a cultural technique.

Yet the way masks are used and interpreted in the spaces of the pandemic is steeped in politics, economics, and emotions. Do we cover up to protect others? Do we retreat behind the mask and hinder expressive communication? Do we wish to avoid masks? Do we consider them a serious invasion of our private space, a source of claustrophobia, or just an itchy inconvenience? Do we use them as a personal or political statement? The mask can be worn out of courtesy to the common realm, to those who share the air with us when we are close to one another and can knowingly or unknowingly spread infectious pathogens. At the same time, it is a disciplinary measure, a way to massage the body politics of the living, to avoid future harms from a potentially disabling and deadly disease, and to prevent overstrain on the medical system.

In this context, the mask performs a particular task in relation to those who may *be* ill but do not *feel* ill. The moral impetus of the mask is attached to reading one's own body for signs of illness emitted by the nervous system that point to COVID-19: cough, headache, muscular pain, loss of the sense of smell or taste, etc. These symptoms can be hard to distinguish from non-COVID-19-related conditions, or they can be absent altogether. Moreover, some people may ignore the symptoms for a variety of reasons, including economic ones. Yet for masks to be as effective as possible, everyone who might be an unknowing transmitter of the disease would have to wear one. This is a dialectical relationship to the unknown that produces uncomfortable feelings: what are the signs of whether someone is willing or able to listen to their body's signals? Moreover, that anxiety can be projected onto oneself or onto others as potentially contagious bodies, complicating the politics of face masks with complex and highly individual affective relationships.

The ethical problem of the mask is therefore also an affective one – whether one can *feel* symptoms, and whether one acts upon one's feelings – and potentially an economic one: whether one can *afford* to *feel* and *act upon* one's *feelings*, and what the effects on others will be if one *feels* and interprets the symptoms appropriately, or if one ignores or is unaware of them, or simply experiences no symptoms to which to react. Moreover, the formal problem of the mask is also a political one that can be enforced through direct power, or nudged, or disregarded in order to avoid the uncomfortable feelings that the mask may mediate in some contexts. The face mask can be promoted as a safety technology, like the seatbelt in a car. Or it can be ridiculed, for example when the Danish rapper Orgi-E – in a music video that includes former Danish prime minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt – wears women's panties as a mock face mask.

However, the face mask can also be a sign of neoliberal self-management when one ventures into places with the goal of consuming goods or experiences where physical distance is difficult to maintain, such as in shops, restaurants, or airplanes. It can be part of an established institution, such as the necessary separation between health professional and patient: most people remember the frustration and desperation evoked by reports that supplies were running low, when doctors or nurses described the moral choices they had to make, unable as they were to adequately protect themselves and their patients from breathing the same potentially contaminated air. Or it can be thought of as commonsensical, thus speaking to the *sensus communis* concerning our orientation, sensitivity, and care toward other people as they make up greater collectives. Yet, when the face mask is everywhere, not wearing it is suddenly a dramatic act with political undertones.

Despite this range of interpretations of the face mask as a cultural technique, in the complicated and highly contextual discourses about face masks as a quasi-universal pandemic fabric architecture, there is an orientation toward the greater collective. While this orientation does not necessarily involve the social body of other people, it is nonetheless material in the sense that air is the medium that physically binds us together. Insofar as the air we breathe can be polluted, we can potentially touch the virus through the air. The mask can prevent that touch in a two-way movement, in a situation where any sneeze's nearly invisible substance has a potentially harmful effect, a microscopic touch of disease in times of corona. Moreover, with a mask, the air we breathe is also our own breath – which can be seen through a dialectics of purity and impurity, as a closed system – while the face mask itself can be covered with pathogens and should therefore not be touched.

The face mask raises context-specific political and moral problems that depend on our understanding of the kind of world we in fact share: a world where profit can be made from producing and selling masks as fashion statements or disposable objects, as signs of caring unaccompanied by hard evidence of the extent to which any given face mask actually does the job of cleaning the air. Amid the wild idea of scale evoked when countries invest in disposable masks for wide swaths of the population,[90] or when hospitals buy large numbers of masks for their staff – or are unable to do so, given depleted supplies – a simple, low-tech stitched object is bestowed with power to mark the difference between sickness and health, life and death. COVID-19's social effects are played out in conditions that are marked not only by the unequal allocation of suffering in relation to class, age, ability, health, race, gender, and occupation,

but also by the capitalist logics of profit and distribution, and these effects are tied to particular cultural techniques.

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Moving away from the skin, and onto a slightly larger scale, as a cultural technique fabric can be used to visually shield and demarcate. It is used as the main building material in the architecture of COVID-19 test centers, quickly erected emergency hospitals, and wards or corridors for the sick. Fabric is lightweight and can be a canvas for the most fragile and precious cultural expressions. It can be a way of separating the body from the world, creating borders. In the way they are woven, cut, and sewn, fabrics embody ancient cultural history, representing craft and care. But fabric also tells the story of some of the most disrespectful, polluting, and exploitative practices of Western culture: cotton fabric's deep roots in slavery, the plantationocene, and the human and ecological damage this culture created in its wake and with synthetic materials' carbon-intensive imprint.

Testing for coronavirus often takes place in breezy, outdoor conditions, sometimes in cars, and often within fabric architectures as shelter from rain or wind. The air that can carry pathogen-bearing droplets and aerosols can also disperse them so that they lose their infectious potential for humans. Despite the high infection rates, many people still do not know on a firsthand basis what it is like to have COVID-19; yet most people know about architectures such as face masks or testing sites, and have had concrete encounters with them. In Western contexts, where institutions like to construct buildings out of bricks or concrete, these often white marquees look like optimistically clean temporary structures. Yet as the high COVID-19 infection rates continue, we may wonder how long these fabric architectures will have to remain in place. In Denmark, which currently offers COVID-19 testing as a completely open and free service as a public good, a vast and very costly public infrastructure has quickly been put into place, augmented with the digital infrastructure of the "corona passport" under proposed legislation for the country's reopening (presented on March 22, 2021).[91] But will these architectures have to remain in place for so long that they will lose their white, crisp newness, diverting our thoughts rather toward the derelict tents in refugee camps that can become home to large groups of people for years or even decades? Will the marquees soon be disassembled and disappear from view, leaving no trace for the archeologists of the future who will research the COVID-19 pandemic? Or will they remain in place and deteriorate, perhaps changing their function, or waiting on hold for future outbreaks of

infectious disease, the process of their ruination a constant reminder of the period we are now living through?

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At the time of writing, face masks remain a contested but an accepted precaution in Denmark, as in most of the world. But the story of masks' political slide in Denmark shows that they play a significant role in the pandemic's political architectures, on many levels. Although mask wearing is particular and individual, and comes with moral discourses of choice, visibility, and risk management, it is also always intrinsically socially invested. Face masks – as one of several technologies and cultural techniques, alongside hand sanitizers, tracing apps, test kits, etc. – are touted as a way for individuals to contribute to collective health in the pandemic, yet they imply difficult moral and ethical questions about how the individual can transmit and circulate the disease through simple life-sustaining acts such as breathing or speaking. At the same time, they are part of the Western economy's normal production chains, pointing to the polluted world around us. They emphasize that human bodies hover on a threshold as both liminal objects and collective bodies. In doing so, they call attention to issues of purity and danger, harking back to fundamental anthropological questions about how different cultures organize themselves around life and death, with the human body's embeddedness within cultural and natural conditions at their very center.[92] Wider ecological and social inequalities and exploitative conditions are as imprinted on the fabrics themselves as they are on the resource problems that go along with them. When the fabric of the face mask is brought close to the body, it emphasizes that body as an object of desire for the virus; yet the virus is only one of many agents that connect that body with its context in different ways. Divisions concerning masks are drawn not just along lines of economics, health, or class, but also between affective responses – ranging from anxiousness to steadfastness – and the position one may be willing or able to take in the face of the pandemic.

In this context, the term *anxiousness* can be better understood if we address it through the thought of nineteenth-century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. Unlike later psychoanalytic understandings, for Kierkegaard anxiety describes the modern condition as a vacillation between the unrestricted freedom of the individual, and thus of humankind, and the correlative, often anxiety-provoking necessity of making choices.[93] Conversely, *steadfastness* characterizes an affective position where the individual refuses to see life-sustaining actions reflected in existentialist concepts. As *affective* responses, both resem-

ble moral positions against the "new normal" that the human response to the pandemic instantiates, the *sensus communis*.

An individual can take up variations of these two positions in different contexts. They help us to understand the pandemic as a problem of context. When laid out on a piece of fabric covering the nose and mouth, that context implies possibilities for communication and togetherness as well as distance: physical entities such as air, particles, and possible infectious agents inscribe narratives of disease onto the fabric, in the intimacy of an age-old technology wrapped around the face.

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In a blog post about restoring order and decorum after a period of neglect by gardening and caring for plants and the physical environment, the American poet Anne Boyer writes:

> There is no volunteering out of this situation, but there is a dialectical relationship to it and with this, opportunities for resistance. You can at least begin to make a path by which your atrophied senses return to shape. There is a lesson in attempting (carefully) the flourishing of your sensitivity even among the brutality. There is a lesson also in observing the current social construction of yourself with the same productive inquiry in which you observe a passing Tesla or a passing cloud.[94]

A consideration of the fabric architectures of the pandemic, such as masks or testing marquees, can yield pointers regarding what constitutes that dialectical relationship. Examining our relationship to pandemic architectures or accessories as cultural techniques can open up a form of productive inquiry, because it emphasizes our intimacy with them: it reveals the human as exposed and always implicated in a particular social and societal context. Boyer suggests that we take a step back from that construction of the self as tied to prevailing political and economic structures, as claimed by physical settings and the partly connective, partly manipulative texture of digital culture – not detaching ourselves from our affective response, but understanding its ties to the context. That is what we are attempting in this book. Investigating touch and touching in times of corona – in this case, through the touch of fabric on our bodies, and in our cities and communities – can be a way to understand that mediating structure of touch as simultaneously and always already physical, social, solitary, and uncomfortably close to all the economic and social markers that separate us.

3 Dancing with the Virus: Moving through the Streets

Use value, long expelled from the field of the economics, is back, and the useful is now king. Money cannot buy the vaccine that we don't have, cannot buy the protective masks that have not been produced, cannot buy the intensive care departments that have been destroyed by the neoliberal reform of Europe's healthcare system. No, money cannot buy what does not exist. Only knowledge, only intelligent labor can buy what does not exist.[95]

A few months before my friend died from cancer, she said that she wasn't fighting anything. She just took the drugs and underwent strange-sounding treatments, like getting her brain "zapped." Or at least, she went for any treatment she was offered while she wasn't considered too statistically close to death for the treatment costs to potentially "pay off." In the meantime, her thirty-seven year-old body withered, one damaged cell at a time. Anne Boyer speaks to the complexities of the gendered politics of cancer when she writes that "the work of care and the work of data exist in a kind of paradoxical simultaneity: what both hold in common is that they are done so often by women, and like all that has historically been identified as women's work, it is work that can go by unnoticed. It is often noted only when absent."[96] In light of a potentially deadly or crippling illness such as COVID-19, intersections between care, data, and death become visible in new ways that affect larger institutional and social structures – and indeed, these intersections become particularly visible when absent because they are damaged, abused, repressed, or left uncared for. (HS)

On February 29, 2020, only twelve days before the country was locked down, the National Gallery of Denmark opened an exhibition of the installation *Circuits (Interpassivities)*[97] by Danish artist Jesper Just. As one walks into the room, a video displays a group of immobilized dancers to whom patches are attached. The patches send electronic stimuli into the dancers' bodies, making their limbs jerk and their bodies contract at intervals apparently determined by the musical score. The electronic impulses that normally take place inside a dancer's body when they respond to music, turning sound vibrations into movements, here become externalized, become physical touches, turned inside out, and made available for scrutiny as a process of mechanical jerks bereft of human volition. The patches placed on the dancers' skin are the kind normally used in physiotherapy to train the muscles for rehabilitation after injury. They mimic the way the brain sends electronic impulses that make your muscles do what you want them to do. In this way, the dancers' bodies – bodies that epitomize control and motor coordination, and which we are predisposed to see as moving *to* the music – are literally moved *by* the music as electronic impulses. Circuits between bodies and technologies are thus reconfigured, raising questions about who

Figure 14: Installation of Jesper Just's *Circuits (Interpassivities),* 2018, at the National Gallery of Denmark. Image Credit: Anders Sune Berg / National Gallery of Denmark

performs the interpretative process from sound to movement. Circuits might be interpreted here as a form of touch: this is a work about points of connection, about touching and being touched by bodies, technologies, and music. In *Circuits (Interpassivities)*, touch is a highly mediated process. There is the electronic patch touching the dancer's skin, which materializes into movement when electronic impulses run through the wires; but there are also bodies touching one another, a hand holding another hand or a foot, bodies spilling over into other bodies. The dancers' faces reveal no emotion; their stares are blank, turned inward.

In his work, Just often challenges conventional notions of the body, working with "perfect," disabled, aging, and transgendered bodies, and questioning and challenging normative expectations and ableism.[98] In *Circuits (Interpassivities),* individual bodies merge and form a collective order on which a microscopic lens zooms in: we see the texture of skin and fabric in extreme close-up, making tangible the parallels between textiles and pixels. The object of the film is not the individual being moved or touched, but a collective. Yet for the visitor, the emotional imprint of the artwork is very present. Indeed, the artwork operates with a multiplicity of things and objects that touch and move one another: bodies, bodies and technology, technology and architecture, artwork and spectator. The twelve-minute film is shown on a loop, on a fragmented large-scale screen situated in the middle of the room. The screen is supported by aerated concrete blocks and an iron beam. Parts of the screen are missing, and the cutout pieces are placed around the floor, standing or lying while still displaying the film. The impression is that of a puzzle that needs to be put together in order to show the screen as a seamless entity, but it is unclear whether we are in the middle of a construction or demolition process. Is the screen being assembled or taken apart? This sensation is emphasized by the white aerated concrete blocks distributed around the room, sometimes stacked into small walls, sometimes single blocks that enter into dialogue with the walls of the white exhibition space, making us aware that the room is also made up of building blocks. The visitor has to move through the exhibition space in order to see all the screens, and in the process becomes a moving part of the exhibition.

In an interview about *Corporéalités,* a 2020 installation with a similar setup made with dancers from American Ballet Theatre, Just compares the layout of his installation to an English garden, stating that he is occupied with the spectator's movement and the obstruction of that movement, and with how narrative is created by movement.[99] As an experience predicated on movement and bodily sensation, *Circuits (Interpassivities)* gives the impression of a maze that is being

Figure 15: Copenhagen, Denmark, June 7, 2020: A Black Lives Matter demonstration with over fifteen thousand attendees, an expression of solidarity with the social and political movement in the US. Image Credit: Thomas Hollaender / Shutterstock.com

built and mediated simultaneously. Is it a giant Pacman game where someone first ate bits of the screen and then spat them out onto the floor? Or are we inside a gigantic pixelated environment, where we are waiting for the gaps in the screen to load?

When the National Gallery reopened after the first lockdown, in June 2020, the experience of Just's artwork had changed significantly. Movement and its obstruction had taken on markedly different connotations during the couple of months that the museum had been closed. Like other arts institutions, the gallery had created routes and maps on the floor to guide visitors according to the rules of social distancing. The effect was not unlike the spatial choreographies with which Just works. When leaving the museum through the foyer, following the sticky labels on the floor, and emerging outside the gallery – perhaps with a phone in one's pocket registering close contacts in a contact tracing app – the sensation of being part of a collective of connected bodies whose limbs move and jerk would linger as one would make one's way toward the train station and put on one's mask before walking down the stairs.

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American writer and activist Barbara Ehrenreich's 2006 book *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy* outlines the history of festivities, public celebrations, and processions in European urban spaces, such as the medieval carnivalesque tradition. For Ehrenreich, these events are moments when physical togetherness in the city's open spaces entails a particular promise of collective energy.[100] Although she sees this promise as largely forgone in contemporary society, an optimistic Deweyan interpretation would recognize here a certain possibility of public spaces: the possibility that bringing groups of people together around shared concerns might spark a public into being.[101] Notably, Ehrenreich describes this productive way of coming together – in protests, for example – as a dance, a form of joy.

During the pandemic, we have seen a number of demonstrations in urban areas – in some cases peaceful, but in other cases violently contested by public authorities, as in Portland and other US cities. These practices are interpreted in a particular light in the context of lockdowns and limitations on how many people can legally gather, which have been imposed by many governments around the world. Despite the contradictory emotions it unleashed, for example, no one can underestimate the powerful imagery of the fifteen thousand people who, by walking the streets on June 7, 2020, were able for the first time to put

Figure 16: Across the world, even popular urban and tourist sites – such as the Spanish Steps in Rome, which are usually teeming with activity – were deserted for long periods during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Image Credit: Em Campos / Shutterstock.com

the idea that *Black lives matter* on Denmark's broad public agenda. It was powerful not least because at that time, although the lockdown was easing, many institutions were still shut, movement was restricted, national borders were closed, and basic rights were curtailed. If nothing else, the demonstration confirmed that *movement* was still part of the human repertoire of ways to inhabit, use, and go collectively in a kind of dance through urban public space. This coordinated and choreographed movement provoked a range of feelings that vacillated between fear, anger, moral outrage, encouragement, and joy. In late capitalist consumerist-oriented cities, where urban spaces are generally laid out for the spending of money on food, clothes, and other items as well as "experiences," urban protests and the political occupation of public space (by both the left and the right) have long been the subjects of scholarly attention.[102] In times of confinement, when the gathering of people is widely prohibited even in outdoor areas because of the fear of rapid viral transmission, urban protests prompt a series of complicated questions about what happens to our understanding of the individual and particular collectives when we are simultaneously more separated from and more closely tied to others.

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As for urban centers, many consumers' spending patterns changed during the pandemic: much of the shopping and experience economy that used to take place in urban spaces or shopping malls moved behind digital screens, where browsing was free of the risk of contamination. But organized protests have seemingly found no such satisfactory outlets online. Moreover, as governments focus on reestablishing economic production and consumerist spending patterns from before the pandemic, we might wonder what that reestablishment will look like. Will the physical architectures of shopping soon become relics of a consumerist past? In the 1930s, the German-Jewish writer Walter Benjamin dedicated much of his work to grasping the arcades of nineteenth-century Paris as the ruins of modernity.[103] Today, shopping malls, high street stores, and boutiques are different kinds of relics insofar as they are constant reminders of human frailty – of the potentially deadly touch of people circulating in the same spaces, touching the same objects, breathing the same air. When countries such as Germany and the UK closed stores in the weeks leading up to Christmas 2020, it was a huge blow to normalcy in a month that normally witnesses a surge in shopping. So, what will happen once the pandemic has subsided? Will people rush to shopping centers, high streets, and boutique areas to buy the things

Figure 17: During the first year of COVID-19, restrictions were imposed in many parts of the world on gatherings in public spaces. This problematization of political protest saw peaceful and legal demonstrations interspersed with riots. An example that received global attention occurred in Washington, DC on January 6, 2021, during the last weeks of Donald Trump's presidency. Capitol Hill was stormed by rioters, including many supporters of Trump, who had held a rally nearby that morning. Image Credit: Sebastian Portillo / Shutterstock.com

they missed out on buying, releasing energy by spending money? Or will we have endless miles of neatly organized shopping districts, empty of business but readily available for political protests, street fights, or collective forms of dance?

The rate at which individuals actually change their behavior to maintain distancing in public spaces during the pandemic hinges on both direct institutional power and the concrete articulations and readjustments of structures in the cities and communities around us. This means that this discussion cannot simply be pitched at intersections such as freedom vs. repression, rules vs. resistance, etc. Rather, we need to inquire into the components that choreograph the forms of dancing in the streets that are possible in the time of corona, and how this choreography hinges on complex power relations and particular conceptions of the individual. In her 1986 book *How Institutions Think,* anthropologist Mary Douglas states: "The pages that follow will not concern anyone who holds that the social order springs spontaneously into being."[104] We will now take up some of Douglas's notions about the extra-individual power that is delegated to institutions, and we will intersperse those notions with Ehrenreich's ideas regarding how that power morphs seamlessly between constructive and destructive solidarity. This will set the scene for our subsequent reflections that dancing in the city streets in the time of corona may be partly joyful, social, and gracious, but partly also anxious, destructive, and exclusionary.

★★★

> The conditions for stable conventions to arise are much more stringent than it might seem. Communities do not grow up into little institutions and these do not grow into big ones by any continuous process. For a convention to turn into a legitimate social institution it needs a parallel cognitive convention to sustain it [...]. A convention is institutionalized when, in reply to a question, "Why do you do it like this?" although the first answer may be framed in terms of mutual convenience, in response to further questioning the final answer refers to the way the planets are fixed in the sky and the way that plants and humans or animals naturally behave.[105]

"Why do you do it like this?" It is a question that we usually forget to ask ourselves or others. Most of what we do is part of the everyday commonplace constituted by background and routine actions, requiring no questions to be asked. But sometimes one is jolted out of the ordinary, and the question "why do you do it like this?" rings with a different tone. Imagine a scenario where you are returning to your home city after having been away since before the pandemic arrived, with no knowledge of what has unfolded in the meantime. Perhaps you

Figure 18: In the British postapocalyptic horror film *28 Days Later,* directed by Danny Boyle, the protagonist wakes up to find London deserted due to a highly contagious virus outbreak that turns people into ravaging zombies. In March 2020, during the UK's first COVID-19 lockdown, Londoners also experienced empty streets and squares in the city, such as the usually bustling Trafalgar Square, due to a contagious virus, albeit without zombies. Image Credit: Sebastian Portillo / Shutterstock.com

were trekking in the mountains, or living in an isolated community for a couple of months. Or imagine a situation where you have been shipwrecked on a desert island, like Robinson Crusoe in Daniel Defoe's 1719 novel, or Tom Hanks's character in the 2000 Hollywood movie *Cast Away*. Or even imagine returning from a place like Greenland, which registered a total of thirty positive cases between the start of the pandemic in March 2020 and March 1, 2021.[106] On top of that, imagine that you had no access to (or deliberately avoided) the news during your time away, and so knew nothing about the pandemic. Now imagine that you are on your way home late at night, walking through your community to reach the place where you live. The streets appear strangely empty. You note that the bar down the road seems to have closed early. A travel agent has boarded up its shop windows, and the florist has posted a hand-decorated, heart-shaped card stating that "we can't wait to have you back." You smile. Well, at least *you* are back now. You notice a homeless person wearing a face mask, and a surprisingly large proportion of dark windows in the high-rise hotel you can see on the horizon. But none of these observations trouble you. You look forward to finally sleeping in your own bed again. Indeed, now that the bar is closed, you have no problem falling asleep in the unusual silence of the neighborhood.

The next morning, you wake up refreshed, only to step out into the same quaint silence. As you walk to the nearest bakery, people seem to be avoiding you: they turn their heads and look the other way. At the bakery, people wait outside in a neatly spaced line. No one is talking to anyone. As you progress in the queue, you see that those ahead of you are either already wearing a face mask or put one on before they enter the store. You tap the shoulder of the woman in front of you, and you feel her shiver. She takes a big step sideways and says, "What's up?" in a brisk voice, adjusting her face mask so that it fits more tightly. "Why do you do it like this?" you ask. She looks at you blankly, making you feel that you are the odd one out. Is it your tan? Your smile? The colorful jacket you are wearing? "Just wear a mask, and please keep your distance," she answers. Inside the bakery, you see a newspaper bearing a headline about the pandemic death toll. Now it is your turn to shiver. The woman working in the bakery stands behind a plastic screen. A big sign tells you to wear a mask in the store, limits the number of people allowed in the room, and asks everyone to keep one meter apart from each other while they are being served. You mumble something about being sorry for not having a face mask but can you please have some bread, and the woman quickly hands you a disposable surgical mask. You put on the face mask and pay, lightly touching the plastic glove on the hand that passes you the wrapped bread, before you rush home.

Of course, if this were a true or even realistic story, our protagonist – "you" – would have had a hard time finding anywhere on the planet without news of the pandemic, or indeed without the virus itself. Even in a scenario where "you" would have been outside of the information flow for months – like the protagonist in the 2002 horror movie *28 Days Later,* who wakes up from a coma to find his hospital empty and central London deserted apart from the bloodthirsty zombies roaming the streets – it seems unlikely that you would be able to make it all the way home without seeing news about the pandemic on a phone or some other screen.[107] Of course, the world is seldom quite as dystopian as a novel or a zombie movie, although the pandemic sometimes comes close and makes the question "why do you do it like this?" insistently relevant.

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During the pandemic, particularly in cities where people live close to each other, daily life has been changed by a number of spatial means and practices introduced to combat rising infection numbers. Examples include the ways people avoid physical proximity, stay at home, reduce their social contacts, steer clear of confined spaces, wear masks, use hand sanitizer or frequently wash their hands, and sneeze into their elbows or handkerchiefs. All of these means are mundane and self-evident responses to what Douglas calls "mutual convenience."[108] They offer answers to the question "why do you do it like this?" when it comes to the practices of social life in the pandemic. If the answer is "just wear a mask, and please keep your distance," then the question "why do you do it like this?" seems trivial to the point of ridiculous. Yet it speaks to the changed everyday practices that people have internalized – whether through coercion, nudges, pleas, pointing fingers, or out of anxiety, self-preservation, care, trust, disbelief, or fear of standing out. Whatever people's motivations, these practices constitute a pandemic form of Douglas's "mutual convenience." That is, they hint at a form of solidarity and tap into issues about the formation of social bonds. This means that we must be on the alert when analogies, metaphors, and symbolic language are used to rationalize and legitimize the politics of choice as we are asked to change our behavior by limiting physical encounters, personal relationships, and the places, architectures, things, and animals with which we convene.

Notably, the call for distancing and restrictions in our relationships with other people, including in urban public spaces, means that people's appearance or sheer presence takes on a different meaning during the pandemic. In some situations, everyone around us appears to be dehumanized: other-

worldly creatures, anonymized because their faces are covered, moving in ways that seem edgy and anxious, like scared animals, avoiding contact. The scenario is closer to a gothic mystery than to anything one would embrace rationally: humans are perceived as possible carriers of disease before they are perceived as individuals with affective relations to others. Limitations have been placed on the size of parties, groups, and social and work-related contacts. Children play with selected friends only. Older people or those with underlying health conditions sometimes completely self-isolate. Hugs, kisses, lovemaking, hand-shakes, or cuddles outside established monogamous relationships are suddenly problematized. The distance induced by the fear of others makes the societal body appear like a cohort of zombies.

The immense speed and wide-reaching effects with which political, socie-tal, and behavioral structures were implemented is precisely what makes our story of the traveler's shocked return home both probable and improbable at the same time. Yet it also intuitively illustrates Douglas's point that institutions do not emerge through a continuous process. The COVID-19 pandemic's effect on daily life is not so much "the shock of the new" – a well-known trope in modern culture – but the shock of the revelation of societal and individual vulnerability. If we think back to how we felt and behaved in January 2020, many of us will probably acknowledge that we would then have given very different answers to the question "why do you do it like this?" than we would give today with regard to our behavior and bodily composure in public space. Indeed, for the "you" in our improbable story, the narrative could have developed very differently, as a romcom version of *Robinson Crusoe* rather than a zombie movie: the tanned traveler returns to their community, strong, wealthy, and capable of rationally fending off even the most gothic of creatures, and falls in love with the acci-dentally equally gorgeous person standing next in line in the bakery queue. In pandemic times a meet-cute in real life is fraught with a host of different emo-tions: physical proximity may cause an anxious shiver rather than a heart rate accelerated by flirtation.

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If "dancing with corona" is anxious and unjoyful – a dance about maintaining distance and avoiding intimacy with viral pathogens represented as wild and dangerous beasts – it is not just metaphorical. As we adopt changing patterns of bodily movement, posture, and behavior in and around other people and public architectures, urban and institutional life is choreographed anew. While these

Figure 19: Antoine d'Agata's thermographic images document the streets and intensive care units of France during the pandemic. The images from the pandemic are evocative in their portrayal of human vulnerability. In these photos, humans touching each other become a layering of warm shades of orange, evoking the sensation of touch as a warm imprint on the skin of the audience. We are reminded of the lyrics of Leonard Cohen "Dance me through the panic till I'm gathered safely in/ Touch me with your naked hand or touch me with your glove/ Dance me to the end of love." Image Credit: © Antoine d'Agata / Ritzau Scanpix

movements take hold of our bodies in new ways, and distance becomes ingrained in how we touch each other in the time of corona, we would like to highlight that this mode of dancing *is* a form of collectively choreographed movement. It is driven not only by fear of contamination, but also by feelings of solidarity, shared compassion, and concern. This is so not least because the effects of not following the pandemic's choreographic rules can be devastating, both for us as individuals and for the people around us. Yet, following Ehrenreich, this form of dance plays out along difficult fault lines where solidarity meets competitive betrayal: in the greater socioeconomic and political reconfigurations brought on by the human response to the pandemic, some people will win, and some will lose – lose their livelihoods, or even their lives. Thus, solidarity can manifest both constructively and destructively, and we can see how ways of conforming to the politics of the pandemic can involve the kind of constructive solidarity expressed in social justice movements, as well as the forms of destructive solidarity expressed through war actions.[109]

It is evident that there is deep and divisive confusion about whose battle we are fighting when adjustments to bodily and cultural customs are linked to ways of "fighting" corona. For example, one kind of solidarity and embodiment of the greater societal good – occasionally described in specific terms as pertaining to the health care system – is sometimes positioned over and above all others.[110] We are not contesting the absolute significance of a functioning medical system – either for society in general, or for individuals requiring treatment for COVID-19 or other diseases during the pandemic – but we recognize that this focus prompts a host of difficult questions about the complicated, differentiated costs of particular political prioritizations and their wider effects on political choices and institutional restructuring during the pandemic. What we can do here is to raise questions about what happens to basic categories – such as public goods and the social bond – and how those categories are affected by changes to public architecture and behavioral norms. Moreover, we can try to trace how the human and political response to the pandemic grinds its way through understandings of what knits together and alters societal institutions, allowing new metaphors, morals, and ethics of togetherness, individuality, and the societal body to emerge and take hold. Some of these concepts entail huge costs in terms of individual rights, and the massive spending of public funds to fight a single battle. But some might also evoke deeply meaningful responses that have to do with care, carefulness, and positive, constructive solidarity in the face of human frailty, and have the potential to become ingrained in new ways in the bodies and minds of people living through this pandemic – thereby perhaps sparking

Figure 20: In hunting par force, a deer or wild boar was chased down until the dogs could get hold of it and the king, or a guest of honor, could ride in front and perform the killing. This eighteenth-century image is from the vast par force landscape north of Copenhagen, Denmark. Image Credit: Parforcejagt i Nordsjælland, Johan Jacob Bruun, circa 1750 / Det Grønne Museum

more just and less individual-centered forms of coexistence that take into account a wide range of feelings and vulnerabilities.

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In her book about cancer, Boyer writes: "The system of medicine is, for the sick, a visible scene of action, but beyond it and behind it and beneath it are all the other systems, *family race work culture gender money education,* and beyond those is a system that appears to include all the other systems, the system so total and overwhelming that we often mistake for the world."[111] For the COVID-19 pandemic, we may rewrite this statement as follows: the urban politics of the pandemic is, for anyone living in pandemic times, a visible scene of action, but beyond it and behind it and beneath it are all the other systems, *family race work culture gender money education,* and beyond those is a system that appears to include all the other systems, the system so total and overwhelming that we often mistake for the world.

The focus on health, the health system, political authority, and direct power during the pandemic always involves ethical principles, and it reflects particular morals that foreground some issues over others and have particular economic and social consequences. Despite the very real problems that arise from the COVID-19 pandemic, and which require prompt answers from politicians and administrators as well as from doctors and other health workers, these decision-making processes touch the core of how institutions work as extra-individual entities in the sense that Douglas proposes. In her effort to unravel how our ways of thinking, feeling, and acting are dependent upon institutions and their particular legitimizing structures, Douglas writes: "There needs to be an analogy by which the formal structure of a crucial set of social relations is found in the physical world, or in the supernatural world, or in eternity, anywhere, so long as it is not seen as a socially contrived arrangement."[112]

Dealing with COVID-19 has been described through the metaphors of the hammerblow and the dance.[113] The hammering down of infection numbers through hard lockdown is followed by a period of interplay with the virus during which it is held sufficiently at bay to keep society functioning. The metaphor of the dance acknowledges this period of interplay as a process involving both partners – unlike the combative metaphors of fight or battle, or the view of the virus as something that came upon us humans from outside, like a storm.[114] Another metaphor for the virus, reportedly used by Søren Brostrøm, the head of the Danish health authority,[115] is the tiger. The act of taming a tiger, turning it from a wild beast to an innocent kitten, is not about putting the animal down.

Instead, it conjures up the image of a species that humans will keep among them in an assimilated manner – indeed, with which humans will enter into a relationship that is like a dance. The metaphor of taming the tiger is thus akin to the metaphor of the dance: a dance with the tiger with which we can think Douglas's statement through. The virus as tiger evokes a wild exotic beast, but it is a beast that can be conquered and put down by the hunter, or tamed and put in a cage. But a tiger, after all, is not an unknown creature: there is a history of hunting, catching, and confining tigers in zoos and circuses, and tiger hunting is often associated with imperialism.[116] By association, the image also calls on premodern notions, such as the Assyrian kings who hunted lions from chariots, or the medieval and baroque aristocracy who hunted *par force* – the noblest form of hunting. The hunt *par force* staged danger in a ritualized and controlled way, violently chasing the game for long stretches. At the end, the king, prince, or sovereign would step in and kill the animal in one glorious act – at which point the meat would taste so foul, because of the stress hormones released by the chase, that no one would care to eat it.[117] But taming or dancing with a tiger is something different than hunting to kill. It suggests a level of interaction, an equality between two partners that acknowledge each other's presence and form choreographed patterns of movement. Nonetheless, the metaphor of the *hammerblow* of lockdown implies that the danger never quite subsides, because the virus remains latently present even when infection rates have been leveled by various measures. For a long time, it seemed that killing the virus with a vaccine would be a glorious ending, spearheaded (!) by scientists, pharmaceutical companies, and rich nation-states in the societies and economies we know in the West. But it is now increasingly acknowledged that even herd immunity brought about by inoculation will not kill the virus. Rather, the dance will continue in some form or other, even though the immediate pandemic danger of COVID-19 will subside.[118]

This story of the dance, and of dancing with or taming the tiger, is a story in which we are all required to participate in some way: we are all invited into some version of the dance with the tiger. Even those who subscribe to the conspiracy theory that the whole pandemic is a hoax to gain control of the population have to move according to the regulations in force. Indeed, dancing with corona in the shape of a tiger makes this dance appear normative. As a large-scale institution in its own right, the constantly shifting and evolving political response to the COVID-19 pandemic works in ways that are closer to the institutions of a belief system – with quasi-sacred undertones that respond to latencies rather than absolutes – than to any accurate medical argument. As Italian philosopher and activist Franco "Bifo" Beradi aptly notes in the epigraph to this

chapter, we can turn our attention instead to questions of use value, and to the tactical issue of how to create forms of collective knowledge that will envision ways out of the situation. Yet, as an institution, the regulations are able to do the thinking for us. If we get used to their pace, rhythm, flow, and steps, we will no longer need to worry so much about how to go about our daily lives; we will no longer need to ask the question "why do you do it like this?" – which may feel like being set free.

But this sensation only applies when the regulations are clear-cut and leave no room for interpretation, which is the case only under the strictest forms of lockdown. Instead, we are faced with a host of uncertainties and a constant need for interpretation, resulting in many different normative systems when mundane tasks suddenly present moral dilemmas. Do I go to a birthday party with fifty-one other people if the regulations limit gatherings to fifty? Do I go to a party with forty-nine people? Can my child attend soccer practice even if it significantly increases the number of people we engage with as a family? Should we gather ten people for Christmas if the regulations allow us to, even if we know that two or three of these people are elderly and vulnerable? Do administrative personnel at the university have to go into their offices in solidarity with the teaching staff, or should they express solidarity with a larger collective by working from home? Who gets to decide that one person is at greater risk than others and should be particularly protected at work or in public? Who are the most vulnerable or indispensable, and who should be first in the vaccination queue? Should I take the vaccine offered if it comes with rare but severe side effects? Such dilemmas multiply by the minute every time a new regulation is communicated.

Moreover, these dilemmas, and our own implication in them, may distract us from seeing that beneath it all lie the other systems – *family race work culture gender money education* – that influence how the pandemic is experienced and what consequences it has for individuals and communities. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that the effects of inequality pertaining to these measures strengthen the unequal risks and effects of the pandemic.[119] That particular institutional structures produce new formations and tap into existing inequalities should come as no surprise. In other contexts, other analogies have been used to legitimize particular hierarchies or exploitative structures, often – as when the pandemic takes the shape of a tiger – cutting a vast object or structure down to the scale of something tangible and close to the body. As Douglas writes: "In modern industrial society the analogical relation of head to hand was frequently used to justify the class structure, the inequalities of the educational system and the division of labor between manual and intellectual

worker. The shared analogy is a device for legitimizing a set of fragile institutions."[120] Perhaps we may think that the wilder the analogy to explain the relations between the mundane and the sacred, individual and shared freedom, etc., the more fragile the institution. If so, the idea of dancing with a tiger should raise all our red flags.

4 Pandemic Stuckness: Cruise Ships and Home Isolation

She is having a baby in June. I see her belly on the screen. Round like the moon. My son says that if he weren't human he would like to be the moon. Always orbiting and enjoying the most amazing view. His way of maintaining a positive outlook amazes me. In the lunar crater of lockdown, my body is tentacular, always connected through some channel or other. Always alone. I think of Donna Haraway and jellyfish, but the moon is barren and dusty and has no place for marine life. All we can do is try to stay afloat on our pandemic-ridden vessel called Earth. (HS)

We can regard a house as a place where we seek refuge, a place where we find peace. But I think that it is a fenced area for other things too. Yes, other things happen there than the ordinary, safety, tranquility, the family, the sheltered nest of the home, etc.; the cruelty of the family is also inscribed in the home, the need for escape, that which causes one to commit suicide. It is all one whole. [...] It is interesting that people often return to die in their own home. They prefer to die at home. As soon as you feel a certain sadness, you want to go home. It is a mysterious place, the home.[121]

In the early days of the pandemic, particularly in Europe, major outbreaks of COVID-19 seemed to be tied to high-class lifestyles. Ski tourists partying in the Austrian alpine town of Ischgl caused a wide spread of the virus, especially to central and northern European countries.[122] Passengers on a number of cruise ships were also infected with COVID-19 early in the pandemic. As closed and dense environments where people gather in small areas, ships' spatial structures contributed to rapid spread of the disease on board. Disembarking passengers could then spread the virus wherever the ship docked, or bring it back to their home countries. A notable example was the British-registered *Diamond Princess,* the scene of the first major outbreak on a cruise ship. One passenger, who had disembarked in Hong Kong a couple of days earlier, tested positive for COVID-19 on February 1, 2020. When the ship arrived in Yokohama, Japan, on February 4, it was quarantined immediately, with 3,711 passengers and crew on board. Over the next couple of weeks, more than seven hundred people on the ship were infected – at that time the largest outbreak outside of mainland China. Fourteen people died.[123]

As stated in a *Nature* article dated March 26, however, "the vessel offered a rare opportunity to understand features of the new coronavirus that are hard to investigate in the wider population. Some of the first studies from the ship [...] have revealed how easily the virus spreads, provided estimates of the disease's severity and allowed researchers to investigate the share of infections with no

Figure 21: Passengers with masks are seen on their balconies of the cruise ship *Coral Princess* after it docked at Port Miami on April 4, 2020 in Miami, Florida. Image Credit: Joe Raedle / Getty Images

symptoms."[124] Thus, epidemiologists and virologist treasured the compart-mentalized way of life aboard the cruise ship, with its large but secluded environment, because it provided a solid data set for them to work with: a living human laboratory of the disease. Yet the article also states that the large proportions of elderly people on cruise ships, and the highly uniform socioeconomic segment that cruise tourists represent, obviously reveal very little about what happens when the virus spreads in the wider population. Moreover, cruise ships reflect a class structure whereby the division between passengers and various groups of employees includes highly differentiated forms of accommodation. This influences the risk of infection, with many crew members living in small, cramped quarters.

Cruise ships are mobile spaces that often sail under flags of convenience to disassociate themselves from particular nation-states and, notably, those nations' tax systems.[125] This makes them specific legal entities, outside of national state contexts, that for limited time periods hold a global mix of passengers and crew. What stories of infections on cruise ships can show us, therefore, is how the pandemic affects different segments of the population in highly differentiated ways even when they are confined to one space.

Cruise ships can be astoundingly huge, holding a population the size of a small town, and are often described as urban entities. Indeed, they include all the functions of a city: people divided into residential units; institutional infrastructures, shops, and leisure facilities; a sense of civic decorum at particular institutional, celebratory, and seasonal events; a strict hierarchy of functions, from the visible captain or crew, through the passengers, to much less visible service personnel comprising cooks, cleaners, maintenance workers, and the technicians in charge of the heavy machinery. After the outbreak on the *Princess Diamond,* passengers had to stay aboard for several weeks. Some had access to balconies and fresh air whenever they wanted, but those housed in interior cabins were stuck there, with only occasional access to the deck.[126] Thus, cruise ships offer an inroad into issues about being stuck – stuck to places, stuck to things, stuck to people who may be simultaneously subservient, caring, exploitative, and exploited. We call this *pandemic stuckness.* Anyone who has lived through some form of lockdown, quarantine, or self-isolation has experienced some variant of it, and it is often associated with domestic space.

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The cruise ship is an extreme place of pandemic stuckness. On an infected ship you have nowhere to go. No escape. You cannot just move your body some-

where else, because the vessel is all there is. Nonetheless, for many cruise ship passengers, which nation-state they were from came to play a significant role in their chances of escape, since different countries around the world deployed different policies to get "their" citizens back. Some went to great lengths to have citizens lifted off particular ships and brought back to "their own countries," enforcing a different kind of segmentation between groups of passengers. After decades of contested refugee politics, with countries fighting over who should take responsibility for refugees rescued at sea, it was remarkable to observe how rescue missions were initiated to get comparatively wealthy Western travelers out of places such as Peru, China, or the Caribbean and back to their own countries. In the face of the global pandemic, the world seemed surprisingly compartmentalized, with people haunted by homesickness and a longing for the familiar – which in turn raised the question of in which country they would rather get ill.

Meanwhile, since many cruise ship crew members come from economically strained circumstances and work under hard and poorly regulated conditions, the logistical issue of repatriating workers from these ships during lockdown – whether they were sick, potentially infected, or risk-free – met with highly different attachments, financial possibilities, and levels of interest from governments and employers, depending on the crew members' positions in the hierarchy. The lockdown's dismantling of the cruise industry entailed heavy costs for a variety of those concerned, a situation fueled by the great distances involved in getting everyone back to their home countries in a situation where borders and travel routes were closing very quickly. Among the many stories of cruise ships during the pandemic, the story about tourists facing great insecurity as travel home became difficult is only one. Another story is about workers who often lacked fundamental rights and were stuck aboard ship, sometimes in a very different corner of the world than their place of origin, sometimes sick or recovering from illness. These workers now found themselves with no job, little financial wherewithal, and few or no travel routes available for them to get home once their jobs were over because the tourists had disembarked. Some were trapped for weeks on end, with no income. Some tried to flee the ships, losing their lives in the attempt. Some committed suicide.[127] The imbalance in the effort and value invested in individuals' ability to leave and return when we compare these two groups is staggering. Nevertheless, both stories tell us something about the extreme conditions of stuckness that became visible as the first wave of the pandemic rolled across the globe.

Stories of COVID-19 infections at sea thus reveal the cruise ship as an out-of-place augmented reality, a particular form of travel, leisure, and enjoyment that

has boomed thanks to the late capitalist economy's focus on individuals' freedom to move, spend money, and immerse themselves in highly controlled and choreographed experiences – experiences that come at great (and largely invisible) cost to other people and the environment. As well as imposing dubious and difficult working conditions on crew members, cruise ships are notorious polluters: as a form of travel, they are allegedly more polluting than air traffic.[128] French philosopher Michel Foucault famously called the ship the perfect heterotopia: spread out in its complete separation from society by virtue of its spatial structure, surrounded by the vast, seemingly empty ocean; yet at the same time, spread out in space as it smoothly moves across the water, traveling great distances.[129] As he stated in his final remark in the famous lecture "On Other Spaces" from 1967:

> If we think, after all, that the boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea and that, from port to port, from tack to tack, from brothel to brothel, it goes as far as the colonies in search of the most precious treasures they conceal in their gardens, you will understand why the boat has not only been for our civilization, from the sixteenth century until the present, the great instrument of economic development [...] but has been simultaneously the greatest reserve of the imagination. The ship is the heterotopia par excellence. In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates.[130]

But in the situation of the pandemic, the metaphor of the heterotopia implodes, and the ship becomes an imprint of the meaning of embodying conditions, of dependencies. In the pandemic, cruise ships are the opposite of the heterotopia. They tell us something about what it is like to be stuck in a place, whether that place is a cabin in the belly of the ship, your private home, a particular nation-state with closed borders, or even a so-called social bubble, a little entity – a sailing community – within a society surfing pandemic "waves." That sense of stuckness is key because it concerns the planetary scale as much as it does the individual body, and hence it is intrinsically pandemic.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

There is an uncomfortable moral problem originating in the fact that the health effects of COVID-19 are not evenly distributed. Significantly more risk is involved for example for elderly people, people with underlying health conditions, or people with extra belly fat, which increases the level of inflammation and therefore the risk of serious effects, even death. Moreover, many studies have shown that there is a direct relationship between socioeconomic status

and the risk of serious side effects, and that factors such as family status, age, race, economic and work status, educational background, and forms of cultural capital influence this relationship in such a way that vulnerable, stigmatized, or excluded groups are proportionally worse off in the pandemic.[131] This can result in the public shaming and blaming of certain (often already vulnerable) groups for spreading the disease.

Another set of divides of particular interest is generational. In Western European contexts such as Denmark's welfare society, heightened risks apply to the rapidly aging baby boomers, a generation that experienced decades of almost unique economic growth, prosperity, and security. This group is not necessarily vulnerable in other socioeconomic terms, and during lockdown it seemed to be split: on one hand, there were those who anxiously chose to self-isolate at home, experimenting with home grocery deliveries for the first time; on the other, there were those who defiantly maintained normality, finding creative ways to circumvent social distancing guidelines in order to avoid the boredom or solitude of being stuck at home. Their otherwise often privileged position in society seemed to be the cause of both responses. In contrast, many parents of younger children witnessed the instantaneous breakdown of decades-old infrastructures that had once guaranteed full-time state-supported care and education for their children, whom they suddenly had to homeschool and care for, often while maintaining full-time jobs. Students, for their part, were sent home from secondary and higher education facilities, and they had to spend large proportions of their study time behind screens because they were often the last in line to return to physical classrooms. It is of course difficult to explain to children or teenagers that, in a situation where social institutions have been cut to the bone, education is considered nonessential. Moreover, it is almost impossible to explain what precisely makes it less essential than, for example, haircuts. Of course, since it is obviously impossible to cut hair via a digital communication platform, it is very difficult for a hairdresser to make money without physical contact with customers, whereas much of education can be carried out on digital platforms if the infrastructure is in place. Yet digital teaching also entails different individual and societal costs. There is thus a difficult balancing act involved in pitching two completely unrelated fields – higher education and hairdressing – against each other. What we wish to do here, however, is to call attention to the moral weight placed on what is considered "essential" – especially during lockdown in some countries, when everyone is sent home to the concrete place of "indoors," which means keeping even small children within the walls of the home. In northern Italy and Spain, for example, the news reported that children were confined to their homes for

more than forty days during the first lockdown. Unsurprisingly, we may say, stories surfaced about people dressing up like dogs or chickens with their children, in order to avoid fines for walking through the empty streets.[132]

Steven Roberts, a sociologist at Monash University, reminds us about the problems of seeing the pandemic's effects in purely generational terms.[133] Most likely, there are even bigger risk gaps between individuals from different countries or societal groups than there are between generations. Significantly, this illustrates that the pandemic is definitely not an equalizer, even though it treats all humans equally in the sense that anyone with a body can get and potentially die from the disease. Not even prime ministers, presidents, senators, or first ladies have been spared infection. In a sense, therefore, we in the West can say that all of us will become poorer because of the pandemic's blow to capitalist structures of production. All of us, that is, apart from those who will get richer, which probably means those who are rich already – as is most often the case, and which the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic only exacerbated, as economic watchdogs have noted.[134]

The constant crisscrossing of the pandemic's individual and collective dimensions indicates the cultural force with which the hammerblow of lockdown hit our lives and cities in the attempt to reduce the virus's reproduction number to a level where hospitals would be able to cope. It reveals the invasive level at which new behavioral and biopolitical rules to limit the spread of the virus have been enforced. And it suggests how the public world has flowed into private spaces and vice versa, establishing new physical and cultural relationships between the two. What links these experiences together, however – even for people who have experienced a sense of liberation or freedom during the pandemic – is the call to stay in place and the sense of stuckness, regardless of how that sense is interpreted by the individual.

★★★

We began this chapter by quoting a 1977 interview with French author and film director Marguerite Duras: "It is interesting that people often return to die in their own home. They prefer to die at home. As soon as you feel a certain sadness, you want to go home. It is a mysterious place, the home."[135] In Western liberal traditions, the home is an enclosed space of privacy and retreat, a shelter. In a phenomenological vein of thought, the German philosopher Martin Heidegger posits the home as a site for "dwelling"[136]; for the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, the house is a shelter for daydreaming that "protects the

Figure 22: View of the Hôtel de Ville during the plague of 1720 by painter Michel Serre. Image Credit: Photo © Ville de Marseille, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Benjamin Soligny / Raphaël Chipault

dreamer"[137] and is defined by qualities of safekeeping and holding.[138] However, as feminist and gay rights activist Del Martin has noted, this stands in stark contrast to the experiences of victims of domestic abuse, who rather need shelter *from* the home.[139] The home thus needs to be seen as a societal institution, a form of spatial and social organization that is highly public. It is less about coherence and safety than it is about retreat and seclusion, and it is therefore based on exclusion.[140] As a site of contestation, the home is a "paradoxical symbol" of safety and threat, peace and violence.[141]

In the lockdowns, the home and the nuclear family were touted as a means of salvation. Yet reports from crisis units around the world noted an increase in domestic violence during lockdown.[142] This underscores the tension in the home as simultaneously a sanctuary and a site of caring duties, labor, abuse, and violence. Indeed, even for well-functioning families, the home can become a sort of desert island – an entity cut off from the rest of the world, yet intimately connected to and utterly dependent on that world.

This brings us back to the escapism of Daniel Defoe's 1719 novel *Robinson Crusoe*, touched upon in the previous chapter. Crusoe is sometimes interpreted as an emblem of modern solitude.[143] Defoe's protagonist is a modern man, and his solitude is locked into the laborious task of fending off the old world in the form of wild animals, cannibals, and other allegedly primitive people, making way for a new world without such wild and gothic dangers.[144] James Joyce famously described Crusoe as an emblem of the British empire: "He is the true prototype of the British colonist [...]. The whole Anglo-Saxon spirit in Crusoe: the manly independence, the unconscious cruelty, the persistence, the slow yet efficient intelligence, the sexual apathy, the calculating taciturnity."[145] Defoe obsessively characterizes all the wild beasts and creatures Crusoe encounters on his journeys (which play out over thirty-six years of fictional time, as he sets off in 1651 and returns in 1687, more than thirty years before the book was published) as the result of this epic task of eradicating anything that is out of place or threatening to the new, Enlightened world to which he belongs. Building a home, being able to define what belongs inside and outside of it, and sheltering from perceived external dangers is as central to Crusoe as it is to those stuck at home during a pandemic.

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The fictional Robinson Crusoe set off on his voyage some years before 1660, when his creator Defoe is believed to have been born. In 1722, three years after

Figure 23: Map of the spread of COVID-19 as tracked by Johns Hopkins University in the US. The size of the red circles indicates the spread of the virus in different countries. Image Credit: VK Studio / Shutterstock.com

the publication of *Robinson Crusoe*, Defoe wrote *A Journal of the Plague Year*, a factional account of the Great Plague of London, which had taken place in real life in 1665, when Defoe was a child.

The bubonic plague killed around twenty percent of London's population and preceded another massive destructive event, the Great Fire of London of 1666, which spread through the city just as the epidemic was tailing off. As it happens, an outbreak of bubonic plague hit the French city of Marseille around the time Defoe was writing his account the Great Plague of London. Fifty thousand of Marseille's ninety thousand inhabitants died.[146]

Looking back from the position of a grown man in 1722, Defoe writes:

> We had no such thing as printed newspapers in those days to spread rumors and reports of things, and to improve them by the invention of men, as I have lived to see practiced since. But such things as these were gathered from the letters of merchants and others who corresponded abroad, and from them was handed about by word of mouth only; so that things did not spread instantly over the whole nation, as they do now.[147]

Newspapers, an Enlightenment invention and a sign of nascent modernity, spread through the European empires during Defoe's lifetime. The adult Defoe could have been the "you" we met in Chapter 3, this time learning about the plague in Marseille from a newspaper headline in 1720. But when Defoe was a child, news traveled differently. Such pockets of difference are not just temporal; they can also be spatial, such as when some populations are hyperanxiously monitoring the disease as a major news item while others seem to live their lives as usual without paying much attention to the pandemic, despite a given death toll. Today, we learn instantly that different countries and communities have responded to and been affected by the pandemic in highly different ways. A "viral news story" is suddenly more than a story that garners enormous online interest and is shared repeatedly across the globe: it may also be news about the virus.

Johns Hopkins University's map of global infections sometimes seems like a sports match, with countries competing over their ability to control the disease, the numbers of ventilators they have acquired, the efficiency of their testing infrastructures, or the availability of vaccines and vaccine doses. Some countries are reproached for not closing down quickly or thoroughly enough, while others are rebuked for closing too hermetically. This global comparison is made on difficult terms because of the underlying structural and cultural differences between the countries, which mean that different approaches are informed by different conditions. Yet differences between neighboring European countries,

Figure 24: Sweden's state epidemiologist, Anders Tegnell, has been notoriously influential on the country's pandemic strategy, which has avoided hard lockdowns and which has been based on a large degree of voluntary cooperation by citizens, albeit at the cost of high infection and death rates compared with neighboring Scandinavian countries. Indeed, Tegnell became so iconic a figure that Gustav Lloyd Agerblad, a 32-year-old Swede, had his face tattooed on his arm. Image Credit: Jonathan Nackstrand / AFP / Ritzau Scanpix

or between different states or regions in the US, also evince highly different approaches. This is evident, for example, if we compare Sweden's reluctance to impose rules with the hard lockdowns in most of the rest of the European Union. In an interview, the Swedish political researcher Gina Gustavsson interprets this reluctance in light of what she calls Swedish state-individualism. She argues that the protection of the individual lies at the core of the Swedish welfare society, which is built on a strong alliance between the state and each and every individual. Thus, the Swedish desire *not* to use hard lockdowns, and not to close schools or childcare facilities, arises from a desire to protect the individual from their own close family.[148] Such debates have also seen the rise of patriotisms, most markedly in the admiration and even sexualization bestowed on the figureheads of health care authorities: Søren Brostrøm in Denmark, Anders Tegnell in Sweden, Anthony Fauci in the US.[149] These men came to embody the longing for an authority to steer the ship, and not surprisingly a nautical vocabulary flourished that dubbed them "captains of the corona battleship."[150] What emerges from such metaphors is the image of countries as ships on the high seas, trying to ride the unruly waves of the pandemic. Amid this veneration for patriarchal authority, the home country and the home form a single package.

<p style="text-align:center">∗∗∗</p>

Politics in the pandemic foregrounds some issues over others, but it can make us forget that we are not confined to our own rooms. We depend on each other, and on the institutions to which we can outsource uncomfortable thoughts about that dependency. As the anthropologist Mary Douglas writes, dependency goes hand-in-hand with moral distress: "For solidarity is only gesturing if it means no sacrifice. [... I]ndividuals in crises do not make life and death decisions on their own. Who shall be saved and who shall die is determined by the institutions."[151] She gives an example: in the early twentieth century, when arguments raged about whether syphilis or tuberculosis constituted the most urgent public health concern and thus deserved collective effort to develop a cure, syphilis won the debate, even though it had fewer victims. As Douglas writes, "the development of knowledge depends on how the knowledge is expected to intervene in practical life. Thinking has more to do with intervening than with representing."[152] What does this mean in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic? When we intervene, is it by waiting for the collective effort that will provide a cure, vaccine, or immunity to quell or reduce the risk of infection, at least in our privileged parts of the world? Is it by anxiously staying at home, to

avoid touch? By going about business as usual with a face mask in our pocket? Or is it by continuously either questioning or mocking the disciplinary techniques and technologies induced by the pandemic? By helping, if we can, to produce the knowledge we do not yet have in order to make the disease less severe, or even bring the pandemic to an end? By falling in love and spontaneously kissing a stranger in the queue for the bakery, knowing as we do so that we are stepping out of line? By joining a protest march in the street? None of these questions will give clear-cut answers or offer clear-cut solutions that will benefit everyone. What we can conclude, however, is that in doing all or any of these things, we participate in establishing what Douglas calls a *thoughtworld,*[153] a horizon for thinking and acting in and through which the pandemic's disciplinary measures connect us with others, although their experiences and ways of intervening may be very different than our own.

Pandemic stuckness is a way to establish distance by keeping away from others, but it is also a way of situating other people as impure, or even of establishing distance from one's own body, the surface of which can become an interface with viral pathogens. Pandemic stuckness thus also allows economies of care to unfold, despite being shrouded in anxiety and sometimes in false hope. Pandemic stuckness is about our relationships: to scale; to things; to concrete rooms and places we cannot get out of; to other people, whose nearness to or distance from us is measured in infection risk rather than generosity, sharing, and care; to the earth itself, which becomes a medium through which risk travels; to the way the pandemic weaves broken human rights and conditions into a new fabric of inequalities. Pandemic stuckness therefore tells us something about the limits of our relationships to things, places, economies, each other.[154] Limits we normally do not think about, because in the neoliberal, modern, urbanized economy, the social and material world is laid out as a constant opportunity for the individual to expand, build, and stock up on new relationships. Pandemic stuckness reminds us that, in this reality, relationships are not just productive and uplifting, but always also potentially abusive, exploitative, restrictive, and sometimes dangerous. Holding us down. Weighing on us. Pandemic stuckness is a sign of our dependencies on embodying conditions, and on each other. In the time of corona, our relationships of dependency – and the economies of care and carefulness they imply – have become visible in new and reconfigured ways.

5 The Tales of a Virus: Corona Temporalities

[A]s everyone with lungs breathes the space between the hands and the space around the hands and the space of the room and the space of the building that surrounds the room and the space of the neighborhoods nearby and the space of the cities and the space of the regions and the space of the nations and the space of the continents and islands and the space of the oceans and the space of the troposphere and the space of the stratosphere and the space of the mesosphere in and out.

In this everything turning and small being breathed in and out by everyone with lungs during all the moments.[155]

One of northern Europe's largest aquariums, which goes by the name of the Blue Planet and is situated close to Copenhagen Airport, has a loggerhead sea turtle called Gaia. When the airplanes stopped taking off and landing in spring 2020, Gaia kept circling her tank. She was born in a French aquarium and is of the species *Caretta caretta*, the world's largest hard-shelled sea turtle. This species is often referred to as "cosmopolitan" because it can be found across the globe – in the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian oceans. In a way it is appropriate that this particular turtle, bred in captivity, has taken up residence close to the airport and may even feel the vibrations of the biggest planes as tiny ripples in her tank. Gaia already had a significant weight problem when she arrived. In fact, her unnamed sister died during transportation and showed massive obesity at autopsy. Now the aquarium staff are struggling to keep Gaia on a diet, and they encourage her to exercise by paddling around the tank, which you as a visitor can watch through a large glass-paneled underwater tunnel. During the first lockdown, the aquarium, which is owned by a private foundation, encouraged the public to donate money to help keep the animals alive. Reportedly, children emptied their piggy banks to save Gaia, who keeps on gaining weight. (KV)

Sewage samples have revealed that COVID-19 was spreading even before the disease had a name, already circulating and mutating. Then the infectious agents were named, brought into visibility through tests and microscopes, and analyzed and interpreted so that humans could understand their structure and effects, and possible forms of medical treatment. Hypotheses about how to end COVID-19's reign began to circulate. As the life of the virus began as a gigantic, distributed hyperobject with amorphous boundaries, a narrative also commenced that focused on identifying its origin in order to be able to mark a beginning (with a host of ensuing conspiracy theories), a middle (long and winding, unfolding exponentially, and bifurcating in various regions of the world), and an end (the form of which at the time of writing is still located in a realm of anticipation and which may continue for a long time). Moreover, this narrative depends on whether we view the story of the virus as an individualized tale that
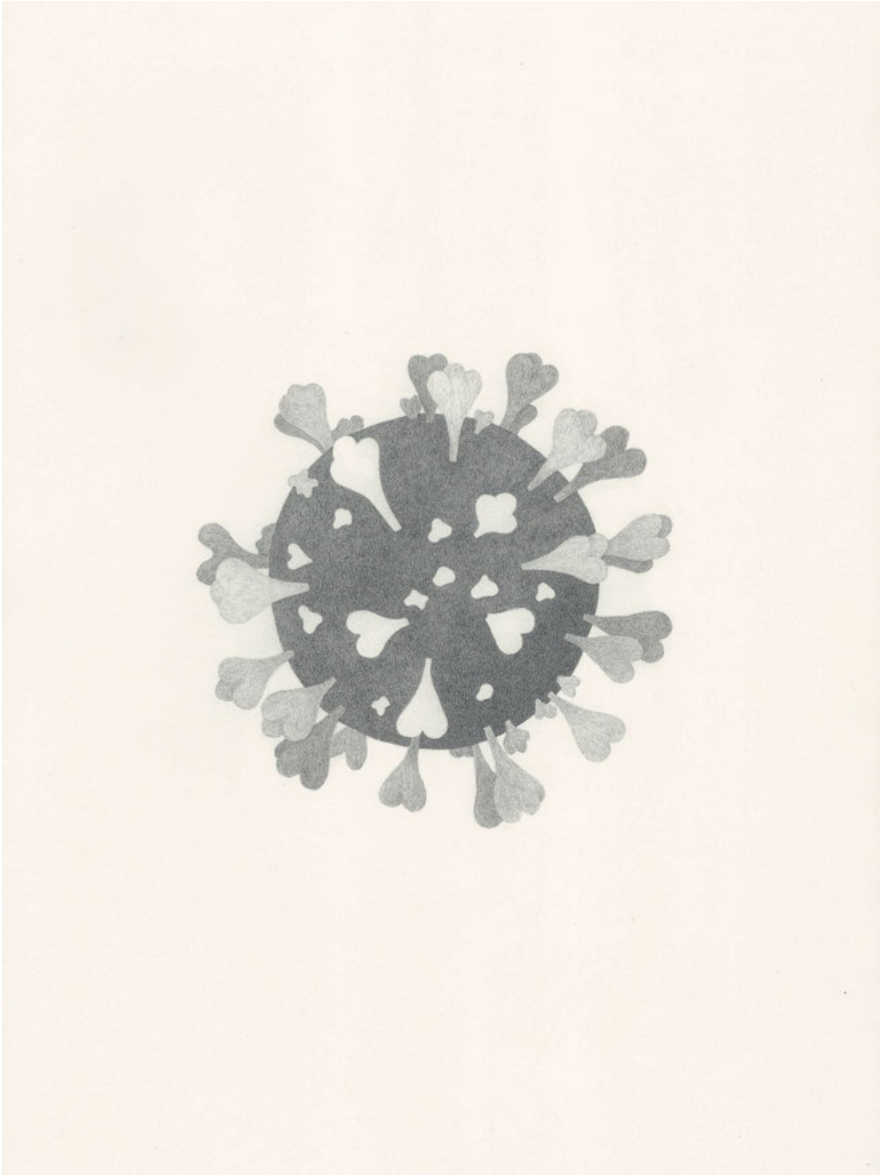
Figure 25: A drawing of the COVID-19 virus by Swedish artist Maria Finn, commissioned for this book in 2021. The image portrays the feared spikes of the virus as small, heart-shaped arms ready to touch and be touched, thus emphasizing the ambivalence of touch in the time of corona.

may have life or death as its outcome, or as a collective narrative that is more grayscale and has many more bifurcating endings – and potential new beginnings.

The temporality of the virus is different than that of a linear narrative. Its path is outside of intentional directionalities. Despite how it felt to many of us, the virus did not arrive suddenly: it *emerged* – for a long time invisibly, evolving as a gigantic reproductive system of code repetitions. It spread and mutated, seeping through and between human and animal populations. In her early response to the pandemic, N. Katherine Hayles called the coronavirus a "posthuman virus," asserting that it reminds us of our interdependency with each other and the ecology of the earth, and of the urgent need to reconsider "the concepts and vocabularies with which to describe and analyze these complex interdependencies, as well as the ways in which humans, as a species, are interdependent with one another as well. The pandemic offers an opportunity to rethink the ways in which we can identify with each other and with life forms radically different from us."[156] While humans have evolved by increasing their cognitive complexity as a species, "developing language with associated changes in brain and body, evolving elaborate social structures, and in very recent human history, augmenting their capacities with advanced technical devices, including artificial intelligence,"[157] viruses evolve toward increased simplicity, which favors the ability to replicate quickly.

The human response to the virus has been to find ways to limit contamination, complemented by techno-optimistic hopes about contact tracing apps and the race to achieve herd immunity through a vaccine. Yet as an underlying potentiality, the virus is concretely *there* as a gigantic distributed entity that implies a number of obstructions to a linear temporality moving forward. As Juliana Spahr notes in a poem written in the aftermath of 9/11, from which we quote in the epigraph above: "In this everything turning and small being breathed in and out by everyone with lungs during all the moments." Spahr describes a similar collapsing of time into a broad present that is also accompanied by a focus on gaps – the spaces in-between humans, and between humans and other species, which we have now learned to regard as spaces of potential contamination. In the pandemic scenario, "everyone with lungs" is at particular risk, and time is characterized by delay.

Before the coronavirus emerged, many people's foremost association with the fear of a virus would be a computer virus, or else a "viral" news story spreading beyond control and potentially reaching places far from the location of its original posting, temporally repeating itself over and over again, sometimes for years. A computer virus is a program that replicates itself, modifying

other computer programs without the user's consent by injecting them with its own code. Its biological sibling replicates within living cells, and coronavirus has brought the biological meaning back from the virology laboratories and into public consciousness.

Notably, as we have seen throughout this book, in so many ways, the pandemic forces us to deal with a different temporality that is not a steady stream but jumps and cuts and folds itself back on top of itself. The pandemic constantly shuffles and reshuffles our sense of time, pushing the temporal experiences that have been ingrained in our everyday lives to the extreme – making more visible what we take for granted. How, then, to tell the story of a virus? What plotlines are available for this tale? These are questions with which we have grappled in this book, spurring us to go beyond our strictly academic comfort zone and embrace the associative modes of the spiraling essay as a shared form of thinking, and of writing as a fuzzy form of memoir that responds to the shared nonlinear experience of the pandemic.

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However, it also sparks the question how to *read* a virus that spreads through mutations in genetic code that make it resemble a dynamic archive rather than a story with a satisfying end in sight. In what temporal modes do we comprehend the experience of the virus? To what temporalities does it give rise? Which narrative frameworks do we use to comprehend its existence among us – let alone represent it?

In *Reading for the Plot*, literary scholar Peter Brooks famously describes that which maintains the reader's interest and engagement as "narrative desire."[158] He builds on both Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and Benjamin's claim in "The Storyteller" that "death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death."[159] Brooks fuses these two influences to conceptualize an "anticipation of retrospection" that takes the form of a drive to ascribe meaning.[160] Narrative desire is coupled with the desire for an ending as a stand-in for our own death, which we are exempt from experiencing ourselves; the desire for an ending thus comes to embody a desire to be able to ascribe meaning. In this process, the postponement of reaching the end – or the fear of reaching the end too soon – is central: "The model proposes that we live in order to die, hence that the intentionality of plot lies in its orientation toward the end even while the end must be achieved only through detour."[161] Detour and delay – for instance, through repetitions or plot excursions – are central to a satisfactory plot. They are closely related to the concept of latency,

which we have argued characterizes the pandemic experience. Living through the pandemic, we do not know how many detours still lie before us, and we are repeatedly left to wonder what tolls the pandemic is still to take on us – as individuals and as a collective. Only time will tell when and how the current emphasis on physical distancing will subside and by which forms of touch it will be replaced – some doctors, for example, hope that the practice of shaking hands will never return, as it is a way of transmitting many diseases, not just COVID-19.[162]

This longing for an end that can ascribe meaning seemed to be innate in many of the first responses to the pandemic. As the philosopher Emmanuel Alloa aptly remarked, the pandemic was interpreted "as a sign, profane or divine, of all the recent errors of humanity, from hypermobility to overconsumption"[163] – for example, by Pope Francis.[164] Reading the pandemic within a framework of guilt and Mother Nature's revenge on humanity can produce tales of Armageddon as well as hopes for what will come *after*. The multiple stories of dwindling pollution during lockdown, and of wild animals regaining lost territories, are examples. At other times, the news gave peculiar echoes of disaster movies about the extinction of the human race. A common pastime during the first lockdown was for people to use social media to share examples of popular culture that seemed to anticipate the events we were living through. By turning to well-known narratives in this way, we could ease the uncertainty and reinscribe what gripped us into familiar, appeasing frameworks, even if they involved gory tales. For instance, Andrea Bocelli's "Music for Hope" concert from the Duomo in Milan on Easter Sunday 2020 became the largest livestream event on YouTube to that date. A tiny figure on the empty square, the blind tenor stood before the grand cathedral whose architecture highlighted the frailty of human existence, and he sang "Amazing Grace," whose lyrics propose a temporality that stretches beyond the individual life, indeed beyond the existence of the earth. The pathos-laden live performance was interspersed with footage from cities around a world empty of people, accentuating the sensation that we were living through the last days on earth, which the Easter narrative only served to emphasize.

Yet, at the same time as the narrative of Armageddon looms large, the future is already folded back onto the present. Contact tracing tries to contain the spread of the virus by tracking past interactions in order to prevent future outbreaks, highlighting how the latent presence of the virus during the incubation period determines futures yet unknown. Moreover, archives of the future open up when genetic material is deposited for unknown later use. In a centralized country such as Denmark, the human material collected by swab is

automatically sent to and registered in a national biobank, along with possible metadata on age, gender, address, socioeconomic situation, and more. In this situation, COVID-19 testing is an opportunity, one might say, to establish a physical imprint or genetic archive of the concrete biological material in which the virus mixes with human cells as it spreads through the population. It creates an archive of the population that will be useful for the prediction of other diseases and conditions, but also ripe for other kinds of data analysis.

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Despite attempts to place the pandemic experience within well-known narratives of the end of times, the experience of living through a pandemic also reveals that many people today are not only reading for the plot and orienting themselves toward a temporality beyond earthly existence. They are also orienting themselves toward other ways of structuring the information that fills the cultural landscape of our everyday lives, going beyond a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end, and offering alternative models to accommodate the serial character of the pandemic, which relentlessly adds new and surprising chapters. One dominant information structure in contemporary culture is the social media newsfeed, which is characterized by a particular temporality that evades any sense of an ending and always has something new to offer. Media scholar Taina Bucher has named the temporal regime produced by the increasingly algorithmic media landscape "right-time." This apt notion describes the ambition of most social and news media platforms to display the right information at the right time.[165]

Algorithmically sorted and organized, these platforms show us what they expect us to want to read, when they anticipate that we want to read it. We may add that this reading temporality seems to revive literary theorist Wolfgang Iser's notion of the "implied reader," which describes the reader anticipated by a given text. The implied reader is a textual structure, not a real reader of flesh and blood conditioned by history and culture: "The concept of the implied reader designates a network of response-inviting structures, which impel the reader to grasp the text."[166] In its algorithmic iteration, the implied reader has become a data double constructed on the basis of the reader's past actions, making it simultaneously individual and collective. Although its algorithmic iteration is also not identical with a particular historically and culturally conditioned reader, this algorithmically anticipated reader is predicated on the input that a particular reader provides to the algorithm. Moreover, the network of "response-inviting structures" not only impels us to grasp the text, but also

anticipates *when* we will grasp it, thus folding different temporalities on top of each other: the timestamp when the text was posted, but also the time when it emerges in my newsfeed, which may be instantly, or hours or days later – or not at all. The incubation period of a post's emergence is dependent on the shape and form of my algorithmically calculated data double.

A key constituent of COVID-19, like many other infections, is that the illness is often characterized by a delay – not only between the moment of infection and the emergence of the first symptoms, but between hospitalization and the longer-term health effects, with many reported late sequelae. When it comes to both political and medical responses to COVID-19, the experience of time as delayed repeatedly resurfaces as a condition and challenge to overcome. We see it in the calculations of the length of time lapse between two doses of vaccine, and in the possibility of extending this period in order to be able to give the vaccine to more people – which in the winter of 2020–2021 ran counter to the spread of new, vastly more infectious, and possibly vaccine-resistant variants.[167] The possible eruption of such new variants, which can quickly lead to an exponential growth in infections and make epidemiological management difficult, emphasizes latency, here as an invisible contest between different COVID-19 variants.[168]

We may thus argue that the temporality that foregrounds the latent and the delayed is a more apt structure through which to grasp the pandemic situation than is a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Yet linearity is hard to shake, perhaps especially in times of *crisis*, which designates a different temporal state than the catastrophic.[169] Linearity gives us something to hold onto – a sense that the world is moving forward when it otherwise seems to have come to a halt. When the news kept rolling in as the pandemic gained ground around the world, something interesting happened on most online news sites: the algorithmically structured and individually tailored "front pages" were replaced with a newsfeed structure, with one story under another. However, these were ordered in a linear manner that depended on when the news ticked in, and not on a sense of individualized "right-time." While the front-page structure is modeled on its print media predecessors, the newsfeed that materialized was more modeled on social media newsfeeds that could be scrolled, displaying seemingly endless corona-related news, but without the individualized tailoring, as if to say that news of the pandemic was rightly timed for everyone. The reintroduction of the posts' linear temporality evoked a keen awareness of time zones: we woke up to an avalanche of news from the zones where people had been awake while we slept. This only emphasized the experience of a truly global pandemic, and ironically of the conflation of time into a broad present

where the sun never sets and there is no need to close your book and turn off the light.

<center>***</center>

Admittedly, the experience of time during lockdown varied markedly depending on whether you worked in a hospital, had children or elderly family members in your household, or had a job that could be performed digitally. Not everyone experienced more time on their hands, but many people definitely had to deal with time in a different way. Literary scholars Irina Dumitrescu and Caleb Smith have compared the experience of lockdown to the lives of preindustrial monks in the fourth and fifth centuries. They recount John Cassian's writings about the difficulty of sustaining their solitude and the monotony of daily life as centering on *acedia,* which in the monastic tradition means "lack of care." Acedia was "a roving, lonely, agitated sensation, a feeling of being unhappy in one's place that could spiral into downright depression."[170] It was linked to the experience that one's ties to other people and God had been severed: "a lonely wandering of the mind."[171] Manual labor or meditation helped monks to tame the demon of acedia; Dumitrescu and Smith argue that the gardening, sewing, or baking that many people took up during lockdown served a similar function, appeasing demons, keeping hands busy, and bestowing a sense of purposefulness. Their hope is that this alternative experience of time may reveal something other than the degree to which we have internalized capitalist logics and feel compelled to produce even in a lacuna. Perhaps it can teach us how to deal with the experience of disorder, buzzing news updates, and time "flowing out of form" that collapses together work, rest, and play, an experience that became acute during the pandemic but had already been part of contemporary life for many people. May we hope for a temporal regime that is less set on moving forward and more set on staying with the trouble of the everyday? One that seeks to provide a space for care, rather than the lack of care that characterizes acedia?

In the 1960s, the French writer Georges Perec proposed the terms *infra-ordinary* and *endotic* to describe that which is neither extraordinary nor exotic but still deserves our heightened attention. Perec laments: "What speaks to us is always the big event, the un-toward, the extra-ordinary: the front-page splash, the banner headlines."[172] He calls instead for an alert, attentive mode that rekindles the astonishment we feel when we encounter something for the first time: "What we need to question is bricks, concrete, glass, our table manners, our utensils, our tools, the way we spend our time, our rhythms. To question

that which seems to have ceased forever to astonish us. We live, true, we breathe, true; we walk, we open doors, we go down staircases, we sit at a table in order to eat, we lie down on a bed in order to sleep. How? Why? Where? When? Why?"[173] Perec calls for a mode of experience that is as attentive to the "small" and habitual as it is to the extraordinary and gigantic.

In giving the mundane as much attention as the everyday, he is doing something very different than the feminist readings of infrastructure that call attention to things that escape public awareness and seep into the background – things that are not deemed noteworthy until they fail or collapse.[174] Sociologist Susan Leigh Star talks about infrastructure as "an embedded strangeness, a second-order one, that of the forgotten, the background, the frozen in place."[175] American novelist Ursula K. Le Guin also points to this when she writes that the history of *man*kind is written from the perspective of the man as hunter, and that it tracks history as a series of advancements such as the control of fire and the invention of the spear and other weapons. She reminds us that these inventions in and of themselves would have been insignificant if there would have been no "carrier bag" or container to carry back the prey, and in this way she points to the significance of the work of the gatherer.[176]

But rather than insisting that we bestow the same amount of attention on the uneventful as we do on the extraordinary, these approaches address the mundane in its own habitat, and this is an important difference in terms of how to tackle that which surrounds us and has become habitual. It is about asking, as we did in Chapter 3, "why do you do it like this?" The social media newsfeed performs a similar drumming-up of expectations regarding the mundane as Perec does with his microsociology: it features everyday, mundane experiences through the vocabulary of the extraordinary. It does not let the everyday remain on the periphery of our attention, but promotes it to the status of infra-ordinariness, post after post after post. It makes for a reading mode that encourages a distracted skimming enacted by the repetitive brushing of the finger against the screen, pushing what has been consumed upward in a slow, caressing, anxious, bored, or impatient manner, depending on the mood of the reader and how interesting the news on display is.[177] The ordinary comes to bear a significance that is otherwise bestowed only on extraordinary events; the small takes on gigantic proportions. However, if we regard social media newsfeeds overall as amalgamations of the mundane that cancel each other out in their competition for our attention, we may read them through a feminist lens, which treats the mundane as an object of interest without having to remove it from its natural habitat and elevate it to a status of the extraordinary.
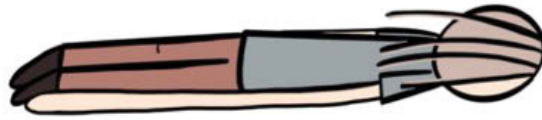
Figure 26: During the first lockdown in Denmark, Danish artist Rikke Reimann posted a new drawing on her Instagram profile every day, counting the days. Image Credit: Rikke Reimann

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In curious ways, these modes of reading and absorbing the news reflect and accentuate the temporal experience that lockdowns bring about: the heightening of attention to the mundane and the everyday because we are locked in, with fewer points of social interaction, makes everything that happens take on new significance, but simultaneously cancels out the sense that anything is "an event" that sets it apart from what happened yesterday or the day before. In spring 2020, many local archives across Denmark encouraged people to send in their diaries, social media posts, photos, and scribblings to chronicle the event of lockdown. On one hand, this archival practice marked the lockdown and the virus as something out of the ordinary – something that in archival terms was deemed important enough to solicit documentation. At the same time, it made for an amalgamation of everyday events that turned the focus toward the infrastructure of the everyday, at a time when that everyday was anything but ordinary.

What the archives were picking up on and trying to harvest was the marked rise in people who were chronicling their lockdown experiences on social media, counting the days. For instance, writer and artist Rikke Reimann's Instagram profile, red.reggae, counted the days by posting drawings every day for the first period of lockdown. Adding such linearity to the passing of the days, which might otherwise risk collapsing into each other, helped to structure time, and created pockets of commonality where people could partake in a communal counting of days. It also made for weird loops, because the lockdown counts started at different times in different parts of the world, even though people were using the same hashtags. Not unlike news sites' introduction of linearity to structure the influx of virus-related news, the lockdown and the impetus to chronicle it somehow formed a resistance to the "right-time" logic of social media: the counting of days disrupted the flow of algorithmically tailored news, making that temporal practice visible by inserting a logic of linearity and progression into it. There is a curious coupling between social media as sites for articulating the mundane and different experiences of time on one hand, and on the other hand the experience of lockdown as entailing different needs in terms of temporality (counting toward an end, or letting it all collapse together).

Figure 27: In March 2020, the Indiana Historical Society launched a collecting initiative to document the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact. The donor's description of this image reads:

"I decided to stay in Pittsburgh in my little studio apartment to protect my parents, both of whom are in Indiana. My phone and the internet have always been a prominent form of communication for me, but I have never preferred it to be my primary method of socializing. Human touch and in-person connection are so important, and the decision to not come back to Indiana, to my family, has been really hard. I miss hugs. A lot. But I know I'm being responsible. Having the technology we have now to still be able to see my loved ones' smiles and laugh virtually with them have become a new form of hug for me. While I don't wish this to be the norm long term, it'll do for now."

Image Credit: "COVID Hug" by Sarah Sha, Indiana Historical Society

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In an interview in March 2021, the Norwegian author Linn Ullmann explained why she had titled the podcast she started when the pandemic hit "How to Proceed": "Both in writing and in reading, we talk a lot about beginnings, and we talk a lot about how something ends, but I often think the question is 'how to proceed,' or 'what now,' or 'what do I do today,' or 'how do I do this,' or 'how do I go on now.'"[178] Delay and the long and winding middle are the temporality in which we are caught. This is the temporality of the everyday, of getting up in the morning and proceeding. The virus seems to create a particular temporality that this book has argued is characterized by latency as the overall trope. Yet the sensation of pandemic stuckness that we have identified also makes for the collision of different temporal regimes and narrative formulas that rub against each other when we try to make sense of these experiences, linearity and the desire for an end being perhaps the most persistent. Probing the available plotlines of the experience of the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the modes of information structuring that inform our engagement with a crisis such as this, as we have done in this chapter, allows us to see the ways in which the pandemic simultaneously taps into and enhances existing temporal modes that structure our lives, while also forcing us to question these narratives and possibly start carving out spaces for alternative ways of engaging with the present and imagining alternative futures. Asking "how to proceed," without knowing the next step.

Coda

Last summer. After an argument, a friend said these days we spend more time stroking our fingers across screens than over each other's skin.
He paused.
Than over our own skin.[179]

When my daughter's daycare opened after the first lockdown, with a heavy set of regulations and requirements – such as the need to wash the linen she uses for her daytime naps at 100 degrees Celsius every day – I started walking the three kilometers between our home and the daycare twice a day, as a welcome break from confinement at home. Each afternoon we would walk through the local forest, passing by a large field overgrown with crooked old hawthorn. One night, lazily scrolling through a local Facebook group, I stumbled on a post that pointed out that this exact field was the site of a mass grave of victims of Copenhagen's 1853 cholera epidemic – an outbreak caused by poor hygiene in the densely populated inner city. On top of the grave had been planted the hawthorn, whose pointy thorns were ideal to keep humans and animals away. Today the hawthorn is the only monument to mark the dead, now long composted beneath the white blossom. The cholera epidemic has been forgotten, except in remote corners of the Internet. Yet the deer and picnickers that otherwise roam the forest still intuitively seem to stay away from the site. (KV)

The time we have taken to write this book has been a time of care and carefulness, as much as it has been a time of moody introspection and uncertainty. Each chapter has revolved around a central narrative about some of the distancing measures – imposed or self-imposed – used to stop or slow the spread of the virus, and has thus tackled different spatial and temporal regimes at work in the pandemic. We have discussed the concrete physical constituents of these measures, the affective responses to them, and their consequences for how we understand touching and being touched. We have also discussed the way skins and screens have become interchangeable, as illustrated in the quotation above from writer and artist Inger Lund Wold. While our reflections have grown out of an unstable and constantly changing situation, we have tried to follow the ripples of effect and affect caught within the largely invisible waves in which the virus has spread through our vicinity, with their latent undercurrents of sickness, death, and bereavement as well as of change, chance, and touch.

In Chapter 1, we considered the kinds of touch and touching that are possible from behind a screen, the validity of a digital hug as it is articulated in statistics from dating and mental well-being apps, and how distance is digitally configured by contact tracing apps. In Chapter 2, we considered how fabrics allow

Figure 28: The mass grave area in Dyrehaven, north of Copenhagen, January 2020. Image Credit: Private Photo / Kristin Veel

distance – from face masks, to curtains, to the marquees that enable public activity and testing to take place outdoors but sheltered from the rain – while Chapter 3 considered distancing between individuals in public spaces by means of changing practices, urban choreographies, and movement through the streets. Chapter 4 moved into the space of isolation: pandemic stuckness, as experienced on a cruise ship or in one's own home during lockdown, where the house and the nuclear family have been touted as a means of cultural salvation but might equally give rise to the claustrophobic feeling that you are stuck – to your nation-state, your home, your family, yourself, or your own body. In Chapter 5, we tackled the different temporalities to which the virus gives rise, as well as the heightened attention to the mundane – that which we take for granted, never asking "why do you do it like this?" – which the virus brings about.

Overall, however, we have not set out to grasp, express, or articulate the changes we have identified throughout this book, or to bring them out of their invisibility. Rather, by trying to deal with our own implication in them – as individuals, and as a small collective consisting just of two people – we have attempted to mark out the slippery and vanishing ontological borderline that these shifts and changes embody. Any narrative of "before" and "after" the pandemic might simply camouflage hidden regimes of restructuring, regimes that cling to exploitative capitalist economic structures or anthropocentric ways of thinking. Such regimes would preserve the problematic construction of the free and autonomous Western individual subject, and would prevent us from seeing and imagining other relationships, collaborations, and forms of cohabitation. But by engaging with our own affective responses to the current situation's perfect storm of crises, we wish to identify and challenge pregiven conditions of knowledge and of academic work. By centering on different configurations of touch and touching, we hope to tease out some of those relationships and the politics that underpin them, and thereby open up a discussion of the reconfiguration of relationships in the possible aftermath of the pandemic, pointing to our hopes for justice even as we mourn the dead.

We had an ambition to be brief, although we knew from the start we would fail. We have tried to move beyond the entrapment of linear and abrasive temporalities that would impose problematic categories of "before" and "after," origins and faults, insides and outsides, ownerships and genealogies; but we are stuck with words, sentences, and page numbers. Along the way, we wished we could just write a poem or a song, or let out a slow, indistinct growl to loosen up the knot that had formed in our bellies. What we did instead was to write this book, and in light of the unusual situation, we decided to write it in a slightly

Figure 29: The greater Copenhagen area where the mass grave is situated and where the fieldwork for this book has taken place. Map by Ludvig Both, Copenhagen, 1858. Image Credit: Danish Royal Library

different way than our usual academic practice, as a set of loosely composed essays and reflections. Thinking about writing differently connects us with feminist reflections on epistemologies, methodologies, ethics, and politics. While we are unable to make visible and express all the intersections of power differentials and social categorizations based on gender, race, ethnicity, class, nationality, sexuality, dis/ability, age, or other factors, these factors are nevertheless at play. They have emerged in unexpected ways as we have turned to notions of affect while moving away from the single-author framework. This also raises uncomfortable questions, since we insist on a politics of location and understand knowledge production as situated, even as our method itself has revealed that our (subject) positions are ragged around the edges. Although this book has bundled together our feeble hopes that we can envision and contribute to practices of caring for a shared and more just future, those hopes never quite coalesce into a cohesive call for practice. Rather than a manifesto for change, we have tried to write our way towards a more differentiated understanding of the latent workings of the present crisis.

Endnotes

Introduction

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Chapter 1

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