# Whose Space is this? A Multispecies Auto-Ethnography of Viral-Human Negotiations in the Contact Zone (#WitnessingCorona)

**Datum :** 26. Juni 2020

Just as this intimidating encounter of an orang-utan in the city SARS-CoV-2 reshapes the spatial and temporal organization of (public) social space. Source: Orangutan by Taylor Herring (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0).

“Like faces pressed against a window, they leer at me menacingly: their very nearness is what menaces” (Timothy Morton 2013).

Co-existing with SARS-CoV-2 is in times of the COVID-19 pandemic without any alternative. I live in the city of Bonn in one of the most densely populated areas of Germany. This poses a huge challenge to carry out ethnographic research. As participant observation of a deadly virus is not a viable option, since I do not want to put me and others at risk by coming into direct contact with the virus, there are still contact zones that I cannot avoid. This for example entails the supermarket and the social space between my apartment and the supermarket. With the German government putting a social distancing policy called “Kontaktverbot” in place, there is only one option left that allows an immersion into the viral-human contact zone for research purposes: an auto-ethnography. This approach to ethnographic research aspires to graphically describe and analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience. Since 29 February, the day the first case of COVID-19 in the city of Bonn has been officially declared, the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 started impinging on my awareness when I was roaming public social space. At first just sporadically, while taking a train or meeting friends, then almost constantly, when the federal state government of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) pronounced the first social distancing measures stratifying public social space with regulations. I clearly remember the moment, when I heard Armin Laschet, Minister-President of NRW, saying in television: „We are dealing with an invisible adversary.”

The following auto-ethnographical observations in the contact zone with the “invisible adversary” were made in March 2020 in NRW – a spatiotemporal context that is characterized by the return of unavailability, as German philosopher Hartmut Rosa (2020) pointed out: „Behind our backs unavailability creeps into all our practices of everyday life.” As a geographer I am especially interested in the spatial patterns of viral-human co-existence characterized by this “unavailability” that creeps up on us like a monster. As we cannot perceive the virus with our senses, we can not tell where we will encounter this potentially lethal agent. With this in mind, how does SARS-CoV-2 shape the spatiality and temporality of our public social space as it is stratified by “the return of unavailability”? Because any possible answer to this question is preceded by an interspecies negotiation, I enriched my auto-ethnographical account with a multispecies perspective.

*Venturing into the viral cloud*

Multispecies ethnography grounds itself in recent paradigm shifts in the Humanities and Social Science that are referred to as turns. The “animal turn”, “nonhuman turn”, “posthuman turn” or “ontological turn” share common efforts to decenter the human in favor of a turn toward other living beings. They also strive to overcome the nature/culture divide put in place by modern Western knowledge production in the tradition of enlightenment thought. A multispecies ethnography ventures into a world full of contradictions and hazy middle grounds from which epistemological clouds emerge, such as multispecies clouds – described by anthropologist Celia Lowe (2010) as a knotty co-becoming of humans, other species, quasi-species like viruses and objects – or hyperobjects – described by philosopher Timothy Morton (2013) as nonhuman entities with an uncanny agency that are so massively distributed that they are hardly graspable agents (e.g. climate change). In the way SARS-CoV-2 is rapidly co-evolving with human and nonhuman host bodies and in the way it acts as a massively distributed

withdrawn materiality, dangerously animate and hardly graspable, it is both multispecies cloud and hyperobject. SARS-CoV-2 does not exist as a single isolated entity, it always-already exists as a viral cloud, as Lowe (2010) termed it. . This cloud is an entanglement of humans, animals and even other viral strains evolving in a co-becoming relationship across various scales and distant geographies (see Voelkner 2020). Following its shadowy path of zoonotic transmission means following the "viralscapes"of multispecies bodies (Arregui 2020). It is through such characteristics that entanglements of nonhuman and human beings along with institutions and nation states are disrupted and biological and political relations are remade (e.g. for human-wild boar relations see Arregui 2020). Instead of passive, easily exploitable "natures" – a distant place where we are not – the multispecies ethnography approach attends to the animicity of nonhuman and human life, an entangled multispecies world that might be called a natureculture – a place where "we are facing culture as we sit on the benches and gaze at the oiled sea" (Hill & Helmers 2004), where the boundaries between nature and culture long upheld by modern Western knowledge are dissolved. As multispecies ethnographers Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw, Affrica Taylor and Mindy Blaise (2016) pointed out, human beings and social space are "entangled in complex, often asymmetrical, ways with the being and becoming of other species". This is especially true for the world of the COVID-19 pandemic, as it is (re-)made by cloudy viral-human entanglements. While the spatial and temporal stratification of (public) social space is reworked by viral-human negotiations, we are witnessing a specific multispecies worlding, an active setting up of our experiential worlds by a variety of species. By attending to this material-semiotic context of the COVID-19 pandemic, we are forced to change our being-in-the-world. Now, to illustrate what this means, let's travel back in time:

*Hauntings in the contact zone*

> *3 March 2020*
>
> *The tapware gleams like silver. The furniture looks so fresh and clean like it has been pressure-cooked. Two men – I reckon them to be from the local health authority seemingly checking the hygienic standard – fill out a form sitting at the table next to us. From what I see, they definitely haven't found anything living that is not allowed flourishing in an ice cream place. My friends and I just ordered ice-cream for the first time of the year. Soon, the conversation steers towards the novel coronavirus that arrived at town a couple of days ago. I hear that some people I know already had to quarantine because they might have had contact to a person infected by SARS-CoV-2. It's coming closer. I suddenly start to feel stressed as I look at the brand new furniture and the tapware of the ice cream shop that just opened for the summer season the day before. Five minutes ago I felt totally safe considering the overly hygienic environment, now this feeling has been interrupted by sudden uncertainty. How can I be sure that the virus is not already here? I instantly become aware of my body, especially my hands. It's an awkward feeling. I try to recall: Have I touched anything yet?*

Spatiotemporal negotiation in the viral-human contact zone is characterized by haunting. The viral cloud of SARS-CoV-2 haunts my *Umwelt,* exposing my body as permeable and vulnerable. I am urged to recall and remember my body's movement in space and its contacts with the environment. As Karen Barad (2017) put it, such hauntings "are not mere rememberings of a past (assumed to be) left behind (in actuality) but rather the dynamism of ontological indeterminacy of time-being/being-time in its materiality". There is spatiotemporal uncertainty hovering over me through my reliance on remembering as part of the negotiation in the contact zone. It has material consequences. What did I touch? What am I allowed to touch? It is through remembering that I am becoming complicit in viral *spacetimemattering*: "Each moment is thickly threaded through with all other moments, each a holographic condensation of specific diffraction patterns created by a plethora of virtual wanderings, alternative histories of what is/might yet be/have been" (Barad 2017).

*We are all viruses now*

> *24 March 2020*
>
> *It's 10am in the morning and I prepare myself to go shopping. I put on gloves and a scarf to cover my mouth and nose. I haven't been shopping for a couple of days now. So I choose the bigger backpack to stuff in the groceries. I usually don't like shopping and always write a grocery list on my smartphone. But this time I put groceries for at least three days on the list including the ingredients for three dinner meals. More than I do usually. Shopping involves being close to other people and touching stuff. I know that these are the environments a virus likes. That's why I try to avoid getting into the contact zone more often than necessary. Spontaneous shopping is currently unavailable. As I am riding my bike to the supermarket, I pass the Kulturmeile in Endenich. The cafés, bars and theatres all stuck notes on their doors announcing their closure. Apart from that, this Tuesday seems just like another Sunday. There is no trace of the virus. With the absence of people on the streets and in cafés the virus is absent, too.*

Indeed, humans and viruses are interwoven with each other. The virus doesn't exist independently from its host. Its non/existence as well as non/presence is entangled with human non/existence and non/presence. I propose to think of the virus not as a single entity, detectable on a certain scale of nanometers, but as an ecology, precisely an *ecology of near-nothingness* which manifests in its specific material production of temporality and spatiality. The prefix

“near” denotes a spatial manifestation/negotiation. Nothingness, here, does not denote an empty void, it carries “a desiring orientation toward being/becoming, flush with yearning and innumerable imaginings of what could be/might yet have been” (Barad 2017). Nothingness, actually, is materially present, active and constitutive. As Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1983) observed, “clouds of viral becomings […] spread materially but invisibly […] evading detection by health authorities, threatening to suddenly emerge, rupturing established biopolitical relations, and assuming novel forms”. To think of a virus like SARS-CoV-2 as an ecology is a necessary move to account for its evolutionary (co-)becoming with other species. Indeed, “we form a rhizome with our viruses” (Deleuze & Guattari 1988). Viruses even rework our bodies. As anthropologist Celia Lowe (2017: 93-94) outlined, viruses have mixed their genes with ours over the course of human evolution. Syncytin, an initially viral gene found in mammal DNA, enables the fetus to feed from the placenta of its mother. This indicates that “viral infection enabled the evolutionary emergence of mammals” (Lowe 2017). It is not just that “we are all lichens now” to follow this famous phrase by Donna Haraway (2014), furthermore, we are all viruses now.

Empty shelves were a common sight in supermarkets around the world, as the novel coronavirus re-organized the public social space of the supermarket. Source: DSCF2278 by Studio Incendo (CC BY 2.0).

*Shopping with the “viral creep”*

> *24 March 2020*
>
> *I arrive at the supermarket and my hopes were answered. The parking lot seems quite empty. I take a shopping cart and enter the supermarket. An older woman stands in my way, I circuit her in a distance I estimate to be 1,5 meters. In the fruit and vegetable section I quickly realize how narrow the ways are. This spatial awareness is new. As I pick apples I feel someone behind me, so I hurry up with the assortment of the apples. I remember someone telling me that no one picks the apples from Italy. I do not see any in this supermarket. Conspiracy theories are part of the viral epistemological cloud. Although people worry, at least vegetables and fruits are in abundant supply. I continue my shopping being aware that I better not touch anything before making my choice. I need to be economical with touch. I notice that I am slightly more stressed than in my normal shopping condition. It strikes me that I lost the focus on the virus. But did I actually? What exactly should I focus on? I close my eyes for a moment and try to focus on my surroundings with all my senses. I notice that there is no supermarket radio playing their jingles although I remember this supermarket to do this at times. There is a focused atmosphere. Everyone seems to be on a silent personal mission – apart from one older man arguing with a supermarket employee about the price of coffee that is supposed to be on offer. So far, so normal. My expectation is probably trained by disaster movies. The only sign of an impending disaster in form of a viral cloud are people sporadically wearing masks and the empty flour shelf. Making whole grain rye flour bread at home is currently unavailable. Just like the virus? It doesn’t smell, make a noise and doesn’t touch my skin. Wait. There was a slightly sensible wind. I felt its chilling effect on the skin of my face. Some person probably passed me. Did the virus travel with the wind? Was it close enough for the virus to jump over to me? Most probably this person didn’t come into contact with the virus, but there is no certainty, just possibility.*

There it is, the viral cloud hyperobject peeking through the curtain. Its hauntings are one of its detectable symptoms. It doesn’t surprise that Celia Lowe (2017) called it the “viral creep” in order to account for its “agentive power to change and rearrange relationships by entering into and out of relations”. The viral cloud is creepingly emitting ink to distract from contagion and transmission. Ink, that is “a thickening of fields; a layering of the relational possibilities and intensities” (Brown & Kelly 2014). By this, the viral cloud “draws attention to the sudden, ephemeral, and material concurrences between humans, animals, non-humans, institutions,

and pasts that occasion contagion" (Brown & Kelly 2014). In this imposed shift of attention lies the potential to instill a shift of our dominant ontological perception of the human body from an impermeable individual to a permeable multispecies collective, as we suddenly become aware of the porosity of our bodies enmeshed with others (Arregui 2020). Through this awareness for our posthuman condition we are urged to even change perspectives and think with the virus (see Selim 2020).

*Microbiopolitics of detachment*

> *24 March 2020*
>
> *Should I worry at all? I notice that I am sweating underneath the gloves. I suddenly feel embarrassed wearing gloves. Are they a proper barrier? I remember touching my face because I felt something itching as I walked into the supermarket. I had already touched the shopping cart before. However, the gloves are not a barrier against contagion for me, but rather for others in case I would carry the virus. I'm not a hypochondriac and I'm also pretty sure that I am not infectious. I haven't had contact with more than a handful people in the last two weeks. But I could also carry the virus and not having symptoms. Nevertheless, the gloves are devices of detachment and that's totally unnatural for me in public social space. I like to be in connection with my surroundings. Detachment is the opposite. Usually it has negative connotations. However, in the viral-human contact zone these connotations totally lose ground. Indeed, gloves can be devices for interspecies negotiation, a requisite for living together.*

One form of viral-human negotiation in the contact zone is material detachment. As I put on the gloves, I not only establish a barrier between me and the virus, I also deprive myself of my tactile sense, detaching myself materially from my surroundings. With the gloves I symbolize the withdrawnness of myself. Gloves – during interaction – cede being just a barrier against contagion, but "become something else entirely – a form of social distance, a mechanism of detachment" (Brown & Kelly 2014).

> *I am* standing *in line at the check-out paying attention to the red glue strip on the ground that is stuck every 1,5 meters in front of the check-out. The virus calls for borders. Not politically, as the virus doesn't care about national borders, but rather for social borders. Practiced detachment. In front of me is just one person. I wait a bit until I put my groceries on the cash register tape. There is a glass plate in front of the cashier protecting her from an uncontrolled sneeze that might carry the virus. This is the future*

*impinging on the 'present'. The viral non/existence is materially present. Near-nothingness. I could touch the glass plate, and history and future would implode into each other at my fingertips. I would tap into viral non/presence and reveal my vulnerability. I decide not to touch. Negotiation completed.*

Physical distancing measurements like these were issued by governments in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Source: Hackney Council coronavirus warning by duncan c (CC BY NC 2.0).

There is another form of viral-human negotiation taking place. It is spatial detachment put into play by "microbiopolitics", which is responsible for the "elaboration of appropriate human behaviors vis-à-vis microorganisms engaged in infection" (Paxson 2008). The microbiopolitics of spatial detachment are shaped by knowledge about the transmission patterns of SARS-

CoV-2 and they are materially visible through the glue strips on the ground and negotiate human-human contact: Keep a distance of 1,5 meters to fellow human beings, otherwise you're prone to contagion. Governmental biopolitics or microbiopolitics suddenly emerge as mediators in the viral-human contact zone. As a result, public social space is stratified by spatial detachment to fight the symptoms of the hyperobject, but fighting one symptom is inevitably linked with the emergence of another symptom. The viral cloud hyperobject is sticky. Moreover, it is an implosion of temporalities. There is no time to completely understand the hyperobject, the future is always-already impinging on the present causing ripples in spacetime. The glass plate is such a ripple. Will it even stay after the pandemic? For Karen Barad (2017) "matter itself in its very materiality is […] constituted as an implosion/explosion: a superposition of all possible histories constituting each bit". The glass plate, a symptom of the hyperobject, being more-than-matter, is a superposition of all possible histories and futures.

*Mediating between chaos and order*

> *28 March 2020*
>
> *It's the day before the official switch to summer time. The sun beams relentlessly and I am standing in line at the ice cream shop – the overly hygienic one. This time, I won't get a glimpse at the tapware and furniture. Eight people, some in groups of two or three, stand in line in front of me, every group keeping a distance of approximately 1,5 meters from the other. It is a weird scenery I have already gotten used to: It doesn't feel natural but also not completely off. In fact, it might save lives. I hear the couple in front of me talking about the regulations. The woman says to her boyfriend with a slightly concerned voice: "Look these people there, they are not allowed to eat the ice-cream here. It says, it's not allowed within 50 meters from the ice-cream shop." Chairs and tables outside are chained together. Some people are standing between them with their hands holding their ice-cream cones. What did these hands just touch? I look down at my hands. I recall the last hours I spent riding my bike with my housemates. I remember having touched the glass doors of a public book shelf. I only used my left hand. I decide to pay attention to hold the ice-cream cone with my right hand. Some other people are queuing behind me. I check the distance. Should I close my eyes for some seconds? I decide not to. I might miss to move up in the line. It feels like it is not the best situation to cause the slightest bit of chaos.*

There is something about chaos in times of crisis. Chaos is the enemy of any biopolitical intervention. It holds the danger of dissolving social order put in place by microbiopolitics such as the 1,5 meter distance measures. Negotiation in the viral-human contact zone is characterized by a mediation between chaos and order. Viral-human relations in the COVID-19

pandemic are uncanny, not just because they are potentially lethal for both the virus and the human, but also because they are setting up boundaries and spaces of control, which are constantly in danger of being undermined. Certainty is haunted by uncertainty. A fact that we cannot help but radically accept. However, this should in no way mean to accept “distancing” as the long-term answer, but rather open up new avenues for (multispecies) relationships of care and respect (see Arregui 2020).

> *Finally, it’s my turn to order ice cream. I enter the designated area in front of the ice-cream shop marked by yellow glue strip on the ground. I order through the window. A sign on the counter says: “As decreed by the local health authority, it is not allowed to eat ice-cream within 50 meters of the shop.” I pay with a bunch of coins by putting them on the counter like probably every other customer this day. I realize that I used my right hand. Most of the coins are pre-COVID-19, but the counter has been touched by a lot of people – more than the book shelf I estimate. I decide to take the cone into my left hand. It’s a subtle, quick spatiotemporal negotiation of touch involving tactile histories and futures, something that might one day evolve into a new routine. Living with the virus will be inevitable. It’s here and it’s supposed to stay.*

*Written on 31 March 2020 and revised on 22 June 2020*

**Author**

Oleg Zurmühlen is a Master Student in Geography at the University of Bonn. He is research assistant in the research group of Prof. Dr. Julia Verne on Development Geography. Working mainly on topics of maritime and more-than-human geography, he is especially interested in how multispecies and speculative research approaches inform socio-ecological transformation. Contact: olegzurmuehlen[at]uni.bonn.de

**#Witnessing Corona**

This article was simultaneously published on boasblogs. Witnessing Corona is a joint blog

series by the Blog Medical Anthropology / Medizinethnologie, Curare: Journal of Medical Anthropology, the Global South Studies Center Cologne, and boasblogs.

**Bibliography**


Arregui, Anibal Garcia. 2020. Viralscapes: The bodies of others after COVID-19. https://allegralaboratory.net/viralscapes-the-bodies-of-others-after-covid19/. Last access: 22/06/2020.

Barad, Karen. 2017. No Small Matter: Mushroom Clouds, Ecologies of Nothingness, and Strange Topologies of Spacetimemattering. In: Tsing, Anna et al.: Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Brown, Hannah & Ann H. Kelly. 2014. Material Proximities and Hotspots: Toward an Anthropology of Viral Hemorrhagic Fevers. In: Medical Anthropology Quarterly 28(2), 280-303.

Deleuze, Gilles & Felix Guattari. 1983. On the Line. New York: Semiotext(e).

Deleuze, Gilles & Felix Guattari. 1988. A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Haraway, Donna. 2014. ‘Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene: Staying with the Trouble’, a lecture given at University of California, Santa Cruz on 5 September 2014, available at https://vimeo.com/97663518. Last access: 11/06/2020.

Hill, Charles & Marguerite Helmers. 2004. Defining Visual Rhetorics. New York: Routledge.

Lowe, Celia. 2017. Viral Ethnography: Metaphors for Writing Life. In: RCC Perspectives: Transformations in Environment and Society 1, 91-96.

Lowe, Celia. 2010. Viral Clouds: Becoming H5N1 in Indonesia. In: Cultural Anthropology 25(4), 625-649.

Morton, Timothy. 2013. Hyperobjects. Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World. Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press.

Pacini-Ketchabaw, Veronica, Affrica Taylor & Mindy Blaise. 2016. Decentring the Human in Multispecies Ethnographies. In: Taylor, Carol & Christina Hughes (Eds.) Posthuman Research Practices. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

Paxson, Heather. 2008. Post?pasteurian cultures: The microbiopolitics of raw?milk cheese in the United States. In: Cultural anthropology, 23(1), 15-47.

Rosa, Hartmut. 2020. https://taz.de/Soziologe-Hartmut-Rosa-ueber-Corona/!5673868/. Last access: 29/03/2020.

Selim, Nasima. 2020. Letter from the (un)seen virus: (Post)humanist perspective in Corona times. In: Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale COVID-19 Forum. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1469-8676.12851.

Voelkner, Nadine. 2020. Towards a socio-political and multi-species perspective on Covid-19. https://www.rug.nl/aletta/blog/towards-a-socio-political-and-multispecies perspective-on-covid-19-16-04-2020. Last access: 22/06/2020.