

## Pandemic Time

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By

I was sitting at my computer when we got the call. My father in his chair, my mother on the sofa. Two days earlier we had found out that my father's aunt was in the hospital in Rio with the coronavirus. She was my grandmother's twin sister. My biological grandmother died in the early 1970s, two decades before I was born. Given her absence, her twin had stood in her place. I had always known her as my grandmother. The twins merged in my mind. Two grandmothers in one. I hung up from a Zoom call and looked at my father who was glued to his mobile phone. She had succumbed to the virus. She had had a heart attack a few minutes before they'd planned to transfer her to a ventilator. I felt a double loss, for the grandmother I never knew and for the grandmother I did.

I was supposed to be in Shanghai this year. I was meant to be doing fieldwork towards my DPhil thesis. But I wasn't able to take up my post as a visiting scholar at Fudan University because in February, at the start of their academic term, Oxford had deemed it too dangerous to travel to China. I had remained in the UK instead. I have been watching the exponential creep of the coronavirus for many months. I knew it was serious. But I never expected it would reach Brazil. I never in my wildest dreams imagined it might take the woman I knew as my grandmother. But it did, as these things do.

I don't want to offer any grand theories here. All I hope to offer is an autoethnography of mediated grief. I wonder how much my experience is universal, and whether or not this experience might be of service to others who are trying to think about this time. Ultimately, this is a record of pandemic time.

Like most knowledge workers, the transfer to working from home was not that great a rupture. I was saddened to not be able to go to Shanghai to conduct more fieldwork, but I had already conducted a year of work in Chengdu and I had materials from there to be working on. There was an infinite supply of articles on WeChat and Weibo to translate and think through. I was used to chatting with my supervisors via Skype from the field, so nothing had really changed there.

But of course, everything had changed. The future sputtered and quieted

itself. I heard birdsong in my room for the first time, because planes had stopped flying over my house. Good for the environment, but a visceral reminder of the uncertainty of a future that had been predicated on international travel. These were the relatively early days of lockdown, when the death rate in the UK started creeping up and people worried the NHS was on the verge of collapsing. This was when the Prime Minister bragged of shaking hands with people at a hospital and then found himself in intensive care two weeks later. This was before the trauma of the moment pivoted from abstract terror to personal tragedy. It was when the statistics were still numbers, before they included a loved one.

At the start of the pandemic I was dizzied by how fast every vestige of my life had digitized itself. My mother and I started doing yoga with an instructor via Zoom. My friends organized pub quizzes. I toured the Picasso exhibit at the Royal Academy from my sofa. Occasionally the camera panned past a painting too fast; sometimes the audio commentary was for a different painting to the one visible. Teething problems, we were all figuring it out. I joined seminars and a reading group. I attended a virtual music festival, danced alone in my room.

There is a phenomenological argument to be made here. We can ponder the 'screenness of screens' [\[1\]](#) and the mediated [\[2\]](#) nature of the present moment. I'm fairly compelled by De Zegotita's argument that a mediated experience is one that has options. That is what makes a mediated experience unreal, what makes screens different to windows [\[3\]](#).

In March, we adjusted to being online all the time. In April, just as everything was settling, my grandmother passed. Suddenly the same online tools were turned towards the grieving process. Two days after she passed, we did a group Zoom call with close family. My parents pulled out photos I had never seen before and we held them to the webcam. I saw the photos flipped in the camera, shaky in my dad's hand. We changed the Zoom background to a family photo and sometimes my mum would shift in her chair and disappear. The photo arrayed itself in such a way that my grandmother sat in a chair, thirty years younger than I had ever seen her, with my dad's face somewhere near her feet.

Then we logged on a day or two later for a mass at church conducted via Facebook. A sidebar flashed the names of other family members when they joined to watch, but we couldn't see them. Just their floating names C— has joined, and R— has joined, etc. Sometimes somebody, whether a normal member of the congregation or someone from our family, would push the like button and a couple of cartoon hearts would float up from the corner of the screen. There were four priests on screen. They were old, and we cringed when they ate the Eucharist and shared the communion wine. Everything had become a disease vector. The lustre

on the cup, a shining reminder of viral potential. There was a dog that sometimes peeked out from behind the altar.

What would this experience have felt like in person? Would it have brought my family closer? I longed for the conversation we might have had on the way to the church we never visited. I missed my cousins; I missed the opportunities to take people aside and discuss family politics. I wondered whether the dog would have been there if we had been there in person; whether we'd have sniggered to ourselves the way we did in our living room had we been sat in a pew. When the priests sang, we remained completely silent. In church, we'd have awkwardly mumbled along.

The rituals felt broken. It felt strange to go from Zoom yoga to Zoom memorial to Zoom therapy. There was no sense of place; I travelled from my living room to all of these virtual spaces. There were no environmental cues. Yet, I adjusted quickly. It's not as if I suddenly found myself incapable of moderating my behaviour from one context to the next. I didn't go to the Zoom memorial in my yoga pants, and I managed not to cry during yoga. "Embodied knowledge seems to be more flexible than often theorized in medical anthropology," [\[4\]](#) note Lenore Manderson & Susan Levine in a recent article responding to the pandemic.

Instead, I experienced a great flattening. My most profound feeling has been that time has ceased to anchor itself to the staccato rhythms of movement. I'm used to watching weeks and months pass by, punctuated by travelling. That was the month I attended X conference, or travelled to interview Mr. Y. That was the time I went home to visit family, or when we went to Brazil for that wedding. Those rhythms suddenly ended. I didn't leave my house. My days passed with trips from the living room to the kitchen. The step counter on my phone one day recorded a grand total of 300 steps.

The screen has also flattened space. One of our yoga instructors is in New York. My family is in Brazil. The hypnotherapist I see once a week is in Bali. I still haven't really left my house, and I'm now keenly aware of time zones. This is hardly novel, but it is no longer a sideshow to the main events of a life lived in the daily rhythms of a particular city. London is still there; it's just dormant. I cycled along Regent Street on a Tuesday morning and saw a single person.

Thirty days after my grandmother passed there was another mass. It was in a different church this time, with a different set of priests. It was the same format though, conducted via Facebook Live. We sent prayer emojis in the chat box. We held hands in London when they mentioned my grandmother's name. It was the only part of the ceremony I really understood, because I don't speak Portuguese having not grown up

there. I wonder if I've ever felt more distant, more conscious of the oceans and timezones that stand between me and my family there.

The Second World War had separated my family. My father is Polish and grew up in a Polish community outside of London. The Brazilian side of my family exists because my grandmother couldn't get a visa to London. She managed to leave via Lisbon to start a life there. She remained, and the three generations following her (she had just welcomed her first great-granddaughter a few months earlier) were born Brazilian.

At the same time that the pandemic flattened time for me, I have been forced to confront this rupture. As anthropologists we often meet people who are living through extraordinary times; a moment of history significant enough to their particular culture that we feel the need to record and preserve it. The pandemic has been both global and local. Global in its rapid spread and local in its variegated response. It has thrown into stark relief the frailties of healthcare systems, the hubris of certain politicians. Bolsonaro jokingly referred to himself as the messiah but said there was little he could do about the virus. [5] He rejected the need for lockdown. [6] My grandmother died. "So what?" he said, when asked about the deaths of 474 people in a single day. [7]

The pandemic is a historical event that we are all living through, in our own way. Our rhythms obstructed, our rituals broken. We have adapted, stuttered and zoomed our way through this great flattening. But did it feel *historical*? Was the daily tenor of your life *historic*? At the start of the pandemic London had unseasonably warm weather for March that lasted an entire week. A whole week of bright sunshine. In March. I sat on a bench outside of my house and marvelled at the silence of it all. I had always expected the apocalypse would come with more smoke, more noise. It was all so abstract, so distant. Shuttered shops and quiet streets.

My grandmother lived through World War Two. She had a twin that she lost to suicide. She watched the iron curtain rise, lived to see it fall. She saw Rio grow from a seaside town to a metropolis. She saw favelas crawl up the mountainsides. She lived to see her grandchildren have children. A few years ago, she wrote a memoir. She hired a journalist and they eventually produced a tiny 47-page book. The first thirty pages were all about her and her twin playing as children, and about the large poodle they had. There was nothing about the war, nothing about the Soviet Union or the dictators in Brazil.

At the time I never understood it, and the family was disappointed. We asked her to write it again. We wanted her to tell us what it was like to live through so much history. But she never did. I think we have to be honest, in our work as anthropologists, that while life might be lived in the shadow

of great events, that does not necessarily help us understand where the light comes from. Holding my grandmother's tiny memoir is to hold a piece of her history, of what she wanted to leave behind. She had no interest in leaving us war or loss. She wanted to leave us a record of childhood joy.

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