

Pandemic Passages

An Anthropological Account of Life and Liminality during COVID-19

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ABSTRACT: The World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 pandemic on 11 March 2020, and the world has been different ever since. Recalling the work of Victor Turner and Arnold van Gennep, this article explores how their ideas about rituals and rites of passage can be used to make sense of the pandemic. In particular, it seeks to show how using the structure of rituals of separation and incorporation and liminality can unpack and highlight changing ideas about temporality, embodiment and relationships.

KEYWORDS: Arnold van Gennep, ethnographic biography, liminality, pandemic experience, rites of passage, rituals, Victor Turner

'I cannot tell if I should be worried about COVID-19', I text to one of my dearest friends. She is in Portland, Oregon; I am in Canberra, Australia. It is 21 February 2020, Australia already has confirmed infections, and we have shut our borders to Chinese visitors; the reporting of an outbreak in the Kirkland nursing home, near Seattle, is still days away. We have both been obsessively reading the news for weeks, discussing epidemiology and data, and outbreaks and hygiene, though equally we chat about the 2020 American primary season and who might be the democratic front-runner. We have a plan to meet at South by Southwest (SXSW) in Austin, Texas, in mid-March to showcase our work on narrative story-telling and next-generation technical systems. A week later, I text again: 'Tidied up the pantry and put in some longer-term food. Not enough yet. But slowly working on it. Thinking about the 14 days of self-quarantining. That I can probably manage. 90 days is right out'. On 1 March, she texts me: 'Costco is out of toilet paper!' We marvel at the fact that Costco can run out of toilet paper. On 6 March, the City of Austin cancels SXSW, and I cancel my plane tickets.

Statistics will tell one kind of story of this pandemic – the number infected, the number who have died, the fatality rates, the R factor, the number of ventilators, intensive care beds, the percentage of the world's population in lockdown. Yet there are other kinds of more personal and intimate stories, too. After all, whilst this has been a truly global pandemic, it has been experienced visually, collectively, physically, personally in almost real time – the local immediacies and the global feedback loop. It has rearranged billions of lives and livelihoods, shuttering businesses, schools, temples, shops, even whole cities and, in some places, countries. And it is still going.

Everyone will have a story about how the COVID-19 pandemic arrived into their consciousness and then into their lives. My story unfolds primarily across two countries – the United States and Australia – and many mediums; I can trace my growing awareness and actions through text chats, e-mails, my credit card records and my changing locations, and the instructions I was giving to my staff and students as we shuttered our physical institute and we all became remote and diasporic.



After nearly 30 years living in the United States, 20 of those working as an anthropologist in and around Silicon Valley, I returned home to Australia to direct a new innovation institute at the Australian National University. The 3A Institute's mission is to establish a new branch of engineering to help shape the future safely, sustainably and responsibly. This represents a different kind of innovation for the university; we are articulating a framework for a new field, iteratively testing it in collaboration with a broad set of stakeholders, and actively curating its pedagogy, methodology, practice and certification. It is from this location, both intellectual and pragmatic, that my encounters with COVID-19 have been experienced.

One of the Institute's partners asks me: 'How are you making sense of all of this?' I had to wonder then, can we talk about life during the pandemic in a way that honours and acknowledges many individual stories, but that also provides us with a broader structure or framework? Especially, how might we talk about life during state-mandated lockdowns and stay-at-home orders specifically, but also about the broader moment/s between the determination of a global pandemic and the putative end point of the scaling up of a credible vaccine or reliable treatment? Are there ways of making sense of what we are currently experiencing and finding the threads that connect the world as it was to the world as it will be? Is there an abstraction or a schematic that might help us organise our thoughts and also our actions? Can anthropology be applied to COVID-19 and, if so, to what ends?

It was a lot of questions. It is partly what we teach our students here at the Institute: how to frame a set of questions that helps generate new possibilities and open up conversations; rather than how to augur in on a solution or even the problem space as articulated.

COVID-19 through an Anthropological Lens

Life itself means to separate and to be reunited, to change form and condition, to die and to be reborn. It is to act and to cease, to wait and to rest, and then to begin acting again, but in a different way.

— Arnold van Gennep ([1960] 2019: 189–190)

On 8 March, I am in Melbourne with 86,173 other people. It is International Women's Day, and the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) is hosting the final of the World T20 women's cricket competition. In advance of the match, I write to my friend: 'Are you

okay with a doing a big public event Sunday? Re virus etc. . . . as I have just cancelled a bunch of US travel'. He replies: 'Ha, I'm not scared of much, and certainly not [of] COVID; I think I am more scared of running out of toilet paper'. It is a remarkable game and a remarkable moment – so many people in an iconic ground to watch women play cricket. As we walk back into the city, we marvel at how much the sporting world has changed, and how lucky we are to see it, and just how good the Australian women's team is, and then quietly towards the very end of the evening, we wonder: 'Will that be the last time we are in a big crowd?' At the airport, the next morning, I see friends: we hug, share food, make plans and joke about toilet paper. On 10 March, the Premier of the State of Victoria warns that 'extreme measures' to contain the spread of the virus are coming (Harris 2020a). On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a global pandemic caused by COVID-19. On 12 March, my friend texts me to tell me that there was a confirmed case in the next stand at the MCG, and the local health authority informs me I have attended a conference with someone who has subsequently received a positive diagnosis. I count the days back to that last gathering, 13 of them, and wonder how many more emails and notifications there will be now.

The news from Italy dominates our television screens in Australia, and the rate of infections is rising in a curve shape we are learning to recognise; it will take three days to double, as it is growing exponentially. On 24 March, the Australian government, acting in concert across all our states and territories, declared a Stage One public health emergency – all Australians were to stay home (Harris 2020b). The logic behind the stay-at-home orders was two-fold: slow the rates of transmission and create time for the public health system to get ready. There were four categories of exceptions to the stay-at-home mandate: health care, shopping for food and basic supplies, exercise and essential jobs. There were new laws passed and states of emergency declared, and our federal and state chief medical officers were on the nightly news. There was frantic shopping; there were jobs suddenly to be done remotely; and there was confusion about schools – it all felt abrupt and sudden. By early April, more than half the world's population would be in some form of lockdown (Kaplan et al. 2020; Sandford 2020; Storrow 2020; Woods 2020).

It is 10 April now, and I am texting with an old friend and former colleague; we have always been the ones who travelled a lot. We compared notes about airports; I sent photos of my coffee from the

around world; we joked about jetlag. He is under a stay-at-home order in California and going a little stir-crazy; he speculates about the dissertations that will be written about this moment. I write:

We have 90 days of it [the stay-at-home order] mandated by law and the likelihood that the international border won't open again until 2021. I still have my passport in my backpack. . . . There are sweet things . . . two of my friends and co-workers live within walking distance and I find baked treats on my doorstep and I have left things on theirs. But the fact of a world that seems to end at the sidewalk (unless exercising or essential shopping) for 70+ more days feels very extraordinary and very strange. I have been asked, in a couple of different places now, to start doing the anthro bit. It's fascinating. Has me reaching back to some of the classics and oldies. Thinking a lot about liminality.

It is the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep ([1960] 2019) that I am thinking about. Liminality, as the moment between moments, and the place between places, is the concept I have always most associated with Van Gennep; as is the idea that passing through such time and space can have a common structure and ritual shape. In truth, though, I could also have looked to Victor Turner ([1969] 2008), Mary Douglas (1966) or even Roy Rappaport (1968). I am thinking of the stay-at-home orders as a kind of liminal moment, the state in between states. The anthropological literature has liminality characterised by the quality of ambiguity and disorientation (Turner [1969] 2008), and also by the rites and rituals that both begin and end a period of liminality: the rites and rituals of separation and re-incorporation (Van Gennep [1960] 2019). This feels like one way to think about or theorise the pandemic. Yes, these theories are a century old, and Van Gennep wrote before both World Wars and the Spanish Flu pandemic, but there is something about the possibility of making sense of COVID-19 as a passage through time and space that seems apt. It is Van Gennep's interest in how we transit through time and space, how we make passages through the world, that strikes me as relevant to this moment. In particular, it is about how certain spaces/times were liminal, what work they were doing culturally/socially, and what work we are doing in them and how we transited in and out of them. Perhaps framing this moment through this lens might offer a different kind of conversation:

The first phase (of separation) comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a

'state'), or from both. During the intervening 'liminal' period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the passenger) are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. (Turner [1969] 2008: 94)

My team and I sift through many stories of COVID-19 stay-at-home moments, from newspapers, blogs and social media – a kind of twenty-first-century arm-chair anthropology, with all its attendant pitfalls (Friedman 2005; Stocking 1983). In that chaotic sampling, we encounter tales of comfortable clothing, COVID haircuts, quarantine beards, sourdough, Zoom fatigue, the challenges of balancing parenting and teaching and work, essential jobs, danger, domestic violence, loneliness, social distancing, sudden relationships, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), death, hope, fear: empty streets and full Intensive Care Units (ICUs) (e.g. Hammond 2020; Kelty 2020; Kulubya et al. 2020; Lipstein 2020; Melimopoulos and Siddiqui 2020; Noguchi 2020; Purtill 2020; Schulman 2020; Seric et al. 2020; Singal 2020; Walsh 2020).

Through it all, and the stories from our own far flung networks, we also started to see patterns and themes emerging – common experiences despite all the cultural, geographic, political and economic variability. There are six threads about this particular set of liminalities that repeat in what Turner might call the 'pedagogies of liminality' ([1969] 2008: 105). It is hardly surprising, then, that, given the nature of liminality, these threads revolve around temporality, embodiment, intermediation, mobility, relationships and identity.

Temporality: Ideas about Time, Speed, Contours and Cadence

The changing contours of time have been a striking feature of this COVID-19 stay-at-home period). We are referring to the passage of time (i.e. the delta between days and weekends, work days, school days), its speed (i.e. very fast versus very slow, as well as immediacy versus delay), its connectivity (i.e. synchronous versus asynchronous) and its dimensionality (i.e. responsibility for the self versus responsibility for the family, community, etc.).

Presence and Embodiment: Ideas about Bodies, Being and Stuff

In asking people to stay at home, governments and public health officials were asking for a significant change in the way work, education and leisure, amongst other things, were experienced and enacted. This has led to complexities around what is physical and analogue; what is digital and virtual; and what

can be remote or imagined as opposed to what can be embodied and present. Fetish objects and nostalgias, as well as ideas about voyeurism, danger and privacy, national celebrations, personal rituals and religious practices have been transformed and transmuted.

Intermediation and Services: Ideas about Managing the Seams and Transitions

Transitions that have previously been invisible to many were suddenly visible, vulnerable and problematised, even perceived as dangerous. The period of lockdown has made visible a series of seams and transitions that have hitherto been invisible to many, including the functioning of the service economies, models of ownership versus the sharing or gig economy, and myriad supply chains. It has also rendered certain boundaries far less mutable: national and state borders as well as those between the domestic and public spheres.

Mobility: Ideas about What Can, Should and Will Move

So, what *does* move during a national stay-at-home order? The answer, it turns out, is many things: bodies, data, goods, food, ideas, images, virus, credit and even services. The rates and ranges of movement have changed and varied along with what is essential and to whom and why it is essential, and the chains along which such things have moved have been rendered visible in unexpected ways, and their ruptures and breakages similarly so. Ideas about the global and the local have been, at least, temporarily re-inscribed.

Relationships: Ideas about Socialness and Connection

When the pandemic first began, the phrase ‘We are in this together’ appeared in many places. The language of relationships found its way into advertising, company messaging and government statements, even while social solidarities were being tested by stay-at-home orders and social distancing. Trust, connection, engagement and care all manifested themselves in unexpected ways.

Identity: Ideas about Who and What We Are

Who we are, and how we make sense of ourselves for ourselves and for others, and how we are, in turn, made sense of have been subject to change during the COVID-19 stay-at-home period. The politicisation and problematisation of life-stages and segmentations (i.e. ‘hello Boomer’), the consequences of being labelled essential, the pressures of self-improvement

discourses (i.e. ‘iso inspo’), the looming spectre of antibody status and the pervasive xenophobia and anti-Chinese racism have all characterised this moment:

In the third phase (reaggregation or reincorporation) the passage is consummated. The ritual subject, individual or corporate, is in a relatively stable state once more and, by virtue of this, has rights and obligations vis-à-vis others of a clearly defined and ‘structural’ type; he is expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards binding on incumbents of social position in a system of such positions. (Turner [1969] 2008: 94–95)

In Australia, as April gives way to May, the federal government remains focussed on testing, tracking and targeted quarantining as their protocols for our gradual release from lockdown (Bell 2020). Like other governments around the world, they have worked to develop their own digital contact-tracing mobile phone application. More than 40 per cent of Australia’s mobile phone population downloaded it in the first three weeks (Bell et al. 2020) and on 8 May the government announced a three-stage plan to ease the restrictions. The first stage saw the lifting on the most stringent stay-at-home orders, and this first period of COVID-19 liminality started to end, at least in Australia.

On the 25 May, I drive to Sydney. It is my first time out of the ACT (Australian Capital Territory) since March. I check into a hotel; the desk clerk tells me there are only three other guests – essential workers. The payment system does not work; it has not been used in a month. The place feels deserted, like the set of a horror movie. A familiar ritual is unexpectedly very unfamiliar (Bell et al. 2005). A week later, back in Canberra again, I text my stir-crazy friend again:

The MOVE fires were my introduction to America back in 1985. Long before Bryn Mawr. And there is something about American cities on fire that has always stayed with me. Watching it burn again from afar is a strange sensation for both how familiar and unfamiliar it is . . . I wonder sometimes how we keep facing forward with love and grace. Except that I don’t ever want to be the alternative.

I send him a photo of our students, which is captioned ‘my small contribution to the future’. Whilst the discourse here in Australia about our post-pandemic world is one of return, snap-back, normalisation and resumption, it is not yet clear how we will individually and collectively exit this period of liminality. I wonder what Van Gennep or Turner would say, and about what ritual they might suggest we should evoke to complete this passage. What are the

rites/rituals for re-incorporation that we will need to do individually, collectively, as a community, as a society? And what, if any, might be the permanent markers on our bodies and selves and societies? Even as we slowly begin to resume our obligations and prior states, there are so many things that were destabilised and shaken up through this pandemic passage, that I keep asking myself how they will ever be stabilised again.

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