Alexandra Wrbka

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Netherlands, Amsterdam, 20 March – 25 April 2020

My name is Alexandra, I am 26 years old and originally from Austria. I moved to Amsterdam two years ago to do my Master studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam. I graduated from the program in February. Next to my studies, I have always worked in a small restaurant/take-out place in Amsterdam and kept this job after finishing my studies. Due to the corona virus outbreak, my workplace was forced to close. I am currently self-isolating myself with my boyfriend in his apartment in Amsterdam. We only leave the house every few days for groceries and only if it is totally necessary.

Friday, March 20th 2020, Amsterdam

Day 5 in self-isolation

I want to start this diary with a short summary of the previous past days.

It all began last Sunday, March 15th. I was called in for work earlier than I was scheduled originally, because my boss had planned to close the shop early due to the current developments. I started my shift at 1 pm and was supposed to stay until 7pm. It was a very quiet day at work with only a few customers eating in and another few delivery orders. Me and my co-workers were communicating constantly with our boss, discussing what time we should best close the place that day. At around 4:30

pm, a customer entered the shop to buy a box of hummus. We chatted a little and he informed us about the speech the Dutch premier had just held about the measures the government would take to slow down the spread of Covid 19: all restaurants and schools would be closed from that very same day, 6 pm until April 6th. By that time, my boss had already ordered us to close the store at 5 pm. So we did. Outside on the street, we witnessed how in the matter of minutes, a queue of people that reached up to our store had formed in front of the coffee shop next door. More and more people arrived by bike until they were sent away by the owner because they were selling out. The situation was absolutely absurd. We finished closing at around 6:30 pm. I spoke to my boyfriend and we agreed I come over to his place after I had packed a big bag of my stuff for the next few days. I arrived at his place around 9 pm that night. And I stayed...

Today we woke up late, as always in the past few days, but which is something I would like to change. Still in bed, I checked some messages and news on social media on my phone. Then I went upstairs to make breakfast. We checked some more news and discussed each other's plans for the day. We decided to do part of our Dutch class right away. We came up with this idea two days ago and have integrated a 1-hour class into our daily routine. We also both wanted to exercise a little, and that's what we did, separately, for about an hour around midday. After a shower, I cooked lunch while my boyfriend vacuumed the apartment. We started watching a series on Netflix on day 1 of the quarantine which we watched during lunch. While having our after-lunch coffee, I called my mum and dad in Austria. My parents offered us to come stay with them, again, as they did during previous phone calls in the past days. However, I don't think it will happen, mostly because of the fact that hardly any flights are currently operating within Europe, but also because my boyfriend most likely wouldn't be admitted to the country and I wouldn't like to spend an indefinite time separated from him. Even so, I have to confess that as the days pass, I catch myself wondering whether it would have been a good idea to return to Austria some time ago already... Tomorrow, my best friend from Austria, who currently lives and

works in Zanzibar island, Tanzania, will fly home. She is the last of almost everyone I know from my home country, living abroad, who is returning. What is more, also my international friends from Uni here in Amsterdam have all but one returned to their home countries.

What worries me too, is the strategy the Dutch government is pursuing during this crisis: I feel like they are not taking any measures at all. I have many friends living dispersed around Europe and am communicating with them and it seems like the Netherlands are the only country trying this "herd immunity" thing. Most of the news I am following are about Austria, and when I read how strictly they imposed the measures there, I wish it would be the same here. Moreover, I feel insecure about the Dutch healthcare system and, if – let's hope not – something were to happen to me or my boyfriend, I'd rather be treated in an Austrian hospital...Plus I don't even know how they *would* treat me here, given I am not a Dutch citizen...we also have doubts about possible racist developments in the care sector if the pandemic got worse (which we honestly think is the case) because most likely, Dutch patients would want to be prioritized over foreigners...

Obviously, life has changed drastically and will change even more in the next time for all of us. On a smaller scale, on a more personal level, it has also changed my social life: I temporarily moved in with my rather new boyfriend. Since we are spending time together now 24/7, we had some discussions and little fights already which is frustrating but very normal. It worries me a little but on the other hand I think it is the natural course of a relationship and the result of spending so much time together, hardly having any privacy. Still, I feel very lucky we have each other in these troubled times where the both of us are far away from our families and now even from our friends.

All in all however, the situation for me at the moment is not too bad: I just finished my Master's (and was lucky enough to still have graduated before the outbreak and following closures of universities) and intended to take this time to dream up and

plan my future anyways. The difference between my plans and reality is, however, that now, I am *forced* to.

March 21st 2020, Amsterdam

Currently sitting on the balcony in the sun. The conversations me and my boyfriend are having is – oh wonder – about our current situation the corona virus put us in. We even came up with the idea of leaving the Netherlands. Since yesterday however, all of our conversations of that nature usually end with us agreeing that we will take one day at a time. Because what other choice do we have?

Today my best friend from Austria who has been living in Zanzibar island for the past months, running a diving school there, has started her difficult journey home to Austria. I wonder whether I'll receive a message of her having arrived safely tomorrow.

We didn't do much today apart from checking news and messages, cooking, eating and some reading. Most of the day we were sitting or lying around lazily. At one point we felt so bad we decided we needed to find us a task. We came up with the idea to plant some chili seeds.

Today my boyfriend decided to quit smoking, mostly because he heard that corona is more severe with smoking men and thought it a good reason to try to stop.

Now, in the afternoon, the sun has finally made its way over the roof to our balcony. I needed fresh air and sunlight desperately.

Today was also the day me and my boyfriend were supposed to go on our holiday in Portugal. Due to the recent events, we had previously changed the location of our holiday at least five times. Having just finished our Master's and PhD's, we felt like we

really deserved a relaxing holiday in the sun and warmth, but then corona happened. At least last night we received notice that our flights were cancelled automatically and we would get a voucher worth the ticket price for the airline.

I worry a lot (or at least think a lot) about friends and family all over the world these days, wondering where they are, how they were handling the situation, what they were doing, how this crisis would affect their futures, etc. I even texted my Greek friends who I met this summer doing my fieldwork for my Master's, asking how they were. Most of them are musicians who by now most likely have lost their jobs.

Today a friend texted that they might introduce total lockdown in the Netherlands as of Monday. Let's see.

Since now the world is changing, we need to adapt the way we interact socially as well. I think it is amazing how fast people all over the world have already developed strategies to shift social life into the digital sphere. For example: yesterday night, me and my boyfriend watched the Facebook livestream of our favorite cultural club/bar here in Amsterdam. It almost felt as if we were there, listening to the storytellers tell their stories. Or, a friend sent a message into our group chat on WhatsApp, saying "imagine quarantine without the internet!"...

March 24th 2020, Amsterdam

Yesterday, we went out for the second time during our self-isolation period that started on Sunday, March 15th. We took the car to go grocery shopping and bought A LOT so we can "survive" for a long while without having to leave the house again soon. When we arrived at home, we tried to disinfect all the products and took a shower. We don't know whether this helps reduce the risk of us getting infected but it still makes us feel better...

"Outside on the street, we witnessed how in the matter of minutes, a queue of people that reached up to our store had formed in front of the coffee shop next door."
https://boasblogs.org/curarecoronadiaries/outside-on-the-street-we-witnessed-how-in-the-matter-of-minutes-a-queue-of-people-that-reached-up-to-our-store-had-formed-in-front-of-the-coffee-shop-next-door/

This time, we felt that people out on the street were more cautious and there were signs everywhere indicating that people should keep a 1.5 m distance from each other. However, the market down the street is still operating ordinarily...

At night, I "met" my friends from back home in Austria on "zoom" video chat. Again, there was only ONE topic: corona and how we all were affected by it in different ways. One of my friends is currently working for her company from home whereas my other friend, a musical performer, had all her future performances cancelled and is trying to find ways to get support from the government in order to sustain herself during the upcoming months. Funnily enough, the last time I spoke to my friends on the phone or via video call dates back a few months, and now we already scheduled another meeting for tonight. As weird as it sounds, this quarantine seems to bring us closer together.

This morning I received a voice message from my boss in which he updated us employees on the situation of the restaurant. He had caught a cold a few days ago and so our take-away location was only open for 3 instead of 5 days last week. His main point was that it is uncertain whether and how we will operate the business in the upcoming time. He also mentioned that we will most likely be compensated by the Dutch government for not being able to work. I am very happy about that since I was already starting to worry about my financial situation.

After I got up today, I did a short yoga routine and made breakfast. After that, me and my boyfriend proceeded with our Dutch class for about 40 minutes. We jammed a little bit on the guitar, the ukulele and mandolin (one of our projects is trying to learn a song together) and then had a snack for lunch.

I did not yet check any news today, neither about the situation back home or here in Amsterdam. However, last night, there was a press conference in which the prime minister had announced new measures fighting the corona crisis. Most importantly, all public gatherings of more than 3 people are forbidden and will be fined. I was glad

to hear that finally, the Dutch government decided to undertake stricter measures such as the ones already in place in my home country or for example in Italy.

My further plans for today are working on a video project, doing a short home workout, another zoom meeting with my friends and cooking dinner. Before all this however, I need to briefly go back to my old place to let my roommate into our apartment. She had to return early from her travels in Mexico. I am a bit scared to meet her, as she has been to many airports in the past two days and I would prefer not to meet any other people except from my boyfriend who I already live with anyway. I think he would prefer that too.

March 27th 2020, Amsterdam

It has almost been two weeks now that I am in self-isolation. One overall thought has been in my head all day today: the situation is beginning to normalize. Now how did I notice? For one, yesterday I was speaking to friends from Austria via video call again. What was different from the first time we talked however, was that we barely talked about corona. While we did talk about how we spend our days in quarantine, news about the crisis, such as new infections or the current death toll of a particular country were not a topic of conversation. Secondly, I am not reading or watching any news on the topic. I also feel like the wave of news about corona is slowing down a bit.

I would like to say a few words about yesterday. Like I mentioned earlier, I am currently staying with my boyfriend in his apartment which he usually shares with a couple, who are at the moment stuck in their home country Greece, where they went to for a family visit when the virus broke out and flights got cancelled. Yesterday morning, we received a call from my boyfriend's housemate, saying they will most likely come home on Friday (today). However, both of them had gotten sick

over the past days and had barely recovered. This put us in a difficult situation: one the one hand, my boyfriend naturally did not want to deny them the possibility of returning to their own apartment, on the other, we thought it a bit disrespectful towards everyone they would get in contact with during the travels home (including us, of course) and might infect. They did not take a corona test, so it is pure speculation that they could have (had) it, but it sure is not a good time to board a plane and spend time around airports if you have or recently had a fever… As I have no say in this since this is not my apartment, I let my boyfriend discuss the matter. At the end of the day, they decided not to return to Amsterdam for the time being. We both love them, of course, but I have to admit that we were a bit relieved to have the place to ourselves for a while longer. I feel so privileged and grateful to be spending this time, which to others probably feels like pure torture, in a big apartment together with my boyfriend, doing things we like, developing new skills, etc.

When another friend of my boyfriend called to say he was currently recovering from corona yesterday, another thought came to my mind: me and almost everyone in my surrounding was sick at least once this winter. So indeed, maybe we all had it at one point?!

March 30th 2020, Amsterdam

In the past days, I have been feeling less and less productive. Sitting on the couch all day long, in front of the screen, or checking my social media accounts on my phone. This feeling of being useless currently prevails, although I am trying to keep up my daily routine of reading at least one chapter of my book, our Dutch lesson, journaling, practicing the ukulele and doing a home workout.

I also started to worry more and more about my future: I should be looking for and

applying for jobs, updating my CV, creating networks, etc. However, I can't help but find it ridiculous to even think about getting a job in these current times. I would probably not even be able to go to a job interview right now under these circumstances. I feel stuck even though I could perfectly use this period for self-development and work on some projects which could help my future career.

Plus, even though I have so much time on my hands, so many hours in a day during which I could do something productive, the days pass so quickly, and at the end of almost every day now, I feel like I haven't achieved anything...

I know and understand that I am very, very privileged at the moment and could actually do with all this free time whatever I wanted to do with it while I don't even have to worry a lot about my financial situation. However, I am starting to feel depressed and so stuck – both literally and physically, that I would prefer being assigned a specific task to do every day.

I think what makes it especially hard for, having just finished my studies, entering this new phase of life, due to the corona crisis, I cannot enjoy this newly gained freedom and instead I am stuck at home. In a way, I have no obligations, I am free, I have the freedom to do whatever I wish to do, whatever I feel like doing, but that freedom is currently restrained within four walls. **One could say it is freedom within captivity.**

Another thing worries me since yesterday: one of my roommates has just returned from her travels and will move back in with us. She is a doctor and offered her help fighting the corona crisis. From today onwards, she will be working with corona patients. While I am incredibly grateful for people like her who keep the system upright in these times, I feel a bit unsafe returning to my place as we would need to be extra careful. That's why I have decided to stay here with my boyfriend in his apartment for the upcoming time.

Alexandra Wrbka

April 5th 2020

Spring has finally arrived. I am sitting on the balcony in the sun, in a t-shirt. Yesterday, I got my first sunburn of the year. It feels so good to be able to enjoy the warmth and the light of this spring sun, gaining new strength with every day. On the other hand this weather makes me want to go out, sit in cafés with friends or have a cold beer, a barbeque in the park, etc.

Yesterday, we met a friend for a walk around the neighborhood for the first time in almost three weeks. We sat in the sun, had a beer and walked around. Before we left the house, we debated whether or not to wear our masks that we had made, stitched by hand, from a clean vacuum bag some days ago. In the end we decided not to. However, when during the walk with our friend, we ended up in one of the busiest streets in the surrounding, we got a little uncomfortable and regretted not to have taken them. Life on this street seemed almost like any other day…

We wore our masks for the first time a few days ago when we went for our second big grocery shopping during this self-isolation period. Although I was skeptical to wear it at first, I felt much more safe then without. Here in the Netherlands, it is still not very common for people to wear them. In contrast, a few days ago, I read the news that in my home country Austria, they had introduced a law obliging people to wear masks in supermarkets and other stores. So naturally, this was one of the “hot topics” I talked about with my parents and sisters when we video-called a few days back. I even showed them my self-made one. Video tutorials of how to make your own mask or links to friends’ online shops who sell masks are constantly shared on social media or in WhatsApp groups. Pictures of friends and family wearing diverse models are exchanged constantly.

Tonight is the night my boyfriend’s housemates are returning. It will no longer be

just the two of us which means a big change in how we behave around the house, how we structure our days, etc. We will have to make logistics work if the four of us want to get out of this period without any harm.

On that note, my housing situation is still unclear. For now, I will stay at my boyfriend's for longer, since my roommate is a doctor working with corona patients and we think it is a bit risky for me to return there and still keep seeing my boyfriend at his place. However, this cannot stay like this forever. That's why I asked my friend who moved back to her home country Italy for this period, if I could sub rent her room until the end of summer. She is in the process of asking her roommates who remained in this Amsterdam apartment. I understand that they can't easily accept me moving in with them under the current circumstances so I'll leave them time and space to think about it. However, I am getting a bit nervous as my current housing contract ends beginning of May. As if looking for a room in Amsterdam wasn't already extremely hard and costly, the corona crisis makes it even worse.

April 13th 2020

Since yesterday, one week has passed since we are 4 people in the apartment, self-isolating together. It has been easier than expected not to get into each other's ways. On Saturday, we took the car to Volendam in an effort to take D's boat on a short sailing trip. The weather was amazing but the engine wouldn't start so we just had a "picknick" on board. I enjoyed it a lot and for a few hours, everything was back to normal, just 4 friends on a day trip. However, twice, this feeling was interrupted when a police boat circled around the harbor and I had to hide inside the boat as only 3 people were allowed on board. Such a strange thing in these times, when you suddenly feel like a criminal for things that ordinarily would be totally normal...

We had a small Easter dinner yesterday together, although I am still sad that I

couldn't celebrate with my family this year. On the other hand, my family in Austria didn't enjoy this year's celebrations as much either, since they were not allowed to visit each other and my grandma was all alone and my parents and sister could not go on my nephew's first real Easter egg hunt.

We are still trying to keep up with some of the few fixed tasks we set ourselves for our daily routine together such as a workout and learning Dutch.

April 25th 2020

A big thing happened in the past 10 days, despite corona: I moved! Although it is certainly not a good time to be moving, I had no choice so I decided to go with the offer of taking over the room of an ex-colleague who, due to losing her job because of corona, had to leave Amsterdam. I thought about it a while and didn't go to back to my old place to pack until last minute. I also won't invite my boyfriend over to my new place for the next week or two, just to make sure.

I just returned from grocery shopping. Found a mini-disinfectant hand-gel, wuhuuuu! Have been looking for that for about 2 months now... I guess people are saturated now. I've gotten used to disinfecting the trolley and trying to keep my 1.5m distance. For the first time today, I had to stand in line in front of a garden store and a second hand shop. It was a weird feeling but I got into talking with the people in the queue. People also smile more, but I guess that's because of this absurd situation where everyone is constantly trying not to touch things and ditch other costumers or pedestrians.

Apart from the shopping experience, I have the feeling that people are behaving far more relaxed in the past 2 weeks. I think it is mostly due to the good weather we are experiencing in the NL at the moment. Everyone is out in the parks or on bike trips

enjoying the sun. And because more people are at home and have more time, there are probably more people outside than usually around that time of the year… I find it a bit scary but at the same time, I also can't stay inside with this weather…

My boss announced that we would reopen the shop soon. I think still only for deliveries and without people dining in however. The government has extended the "intelligent lockdown" until mid-May, so I don't think much is going to change in the service industry. To be honest, I wouldn't mind starting to work again after all this time.

Concerning my daily routine, it has changed insofar as I moved out of my "quarantine zone" with my boyfriend and his roommates yesterday. In the past two weeks, we got a little sloppy with our schedule and didn't practice Dutch that regularly anymore, for example. We've also been going out much more frequently. I don't know if I should be worried or whether it is normal to finally feeling the need to leave one's house.

Preview-Picture by Katharina Sabernig. She creates, knits and photographs medicinal objects to make medical content accessible to the senses (https://www.knitted-anatomy.at/).