Nicolas Langlitz

“Time will come to a stop.”

New York City, Maplewood, NJ, 15 March – 24 April 2020, 18 August 2020

I’m professor of anthropology at The New School in New York. As the COVID crisis hits and administrative meetings multiply, I have the bad luck of chairing the department. I started this diary when the university had just closed its campus and all meetings were moved to Zoom. This semester I’m not teaching though. Two years ago, my family moved from Brooklyn to Maplewood, NJ. Maplewood is a village or suburb in the Greater New York Area. A direct train connects us with Penn Station. Most people here work in Manhattan. They tend to be middle- to upper middle-class white collar workers who now get to work from their home offices (although one of our friends plays a role in the Broadway musical Harry Potter, which was an extremely well paying job, but now she is without income). When I don’t have to go to my office, I usually work in the Millburn Public Library. But that has just closed as well. So I’m working from our house, which I share with my wife Donya and our two small children, Kiki (5 years old) and Loretta (2 years). All daycares have closed and they can’t go on playdates with their friends anymore, which is not exactly conducive to work, but at least I do get to spend more time with the children.

Finally Nothing Happens

15 March 2020

The New School has shut down classes and administrative meetings to prevent the spreading of Sars-CoV2. Everything has been moved to Zoom video conferences. On Wednesday, I already had online meetings from 10am to 4pm. Now spring break gives us a moment to breathe.

It's a beautiful spring day. The trees are beginning to blossom. I go running on the soccer field of DeHart Park right behind our house and our 5-year-old daughter Kiki agrees to run with me for the first time (she gets to take short-cuts). My wife Donya rides next to me with our two-year old daughter Loretta on the back seat. Many people are enjoying the spring weather in the park. Everybody keeps their distance, but the atmosphere is relaxed and peaceful. It feels like the time around Thanksgiving or between Christmas and New Year when everything comes to a halt. As I run, I feel energized and free. I'm looking forward to a summer without travel during which I can write a short book on psychedelic mysticism titled *Permanent Holiday*.

The situation reminds me of how World War I began. Everybody was excited because, finally, something was about to happen. Today, everybody is excited because, finally, nothing happens. Time will come to a stop. But we know how long the enthusiasm about the war lasted.

"The situation reminds me of how World War I began. Everybody was excited because, finally, something was about to happen. Today, everybody is excited because, finally, nothing happens."

German Consulate Visit

19 March 2020

My COVID scare of the day is that we have reached the point at which Germans offer unbureaucratic help. Yesterday, it occurred to us that we might not be able to get into the EU because we never applied for a German passport for Loretta and the EU has closed its borders to non-citizens. So we wrote to the consulate. Usually, it takes 2-3 months just to get an appointment and then another 2 months for them to issue the passport. They responded immediately that they didn't know for how much longer they would be open, asked us to come in this morning, printed a passport on the spot, handed it to us, and wished us well. Apocalyptic!

Afterwards, we drive down to midtown and Kiki and I return some library books to my office and take two bags of books that I might need over the summer.

New York is uncannily empty. Over the free roads alongside the waterfront big electronic message boards advise us to stay home.

Anthropological Pessimism

20 March 2020

The Dutch organizer of a canceled psychedelics conference writes back to me about rescheduling the event. I have never met him in person, but these days otherwise purely logistical exchanges often turn into more personal conversations about how we experience this global pandemic in different parts of the world. This colleague expresses his hope that the crisis will not only kill possibly millions of people and destroy our economies but foster a sense of human interconnectedness. And indeed we're creating and feeling this interconnectedness as we write to each other. I experience it when I leave the house to go jogging on the soccer field before dinner. Every time a short middle-aged black woman in a black parka paces around the field. She is always talking to someone on her cell phone, but every time I pass her we exchange a smile. In the university, one of my colleagues has come down with a high

fever and, although they still don't have the resources to test him, he has to self-quarantine. Immediately, other members of the department offer to go shopping for him and drop off bags of food at his doorstep. Yes, we are all in this together and facing this challenge together nurtures a sense of solidarity.

And yet it's not just because I enjoy playing devil's advocate that I object to the Dutch colleague's expression of hope. From past epidemics we know that they don't alleviate but aggravate social inequalities. Here in the United States, this effect will be especially dramatic as those without secure jobs—and even many with jobs they thought secure—are losing their income and their housing. The rich will take a temporary hit as the plunging stock markets decimate their wealth, but if you have more than enough money even in times like these now is the time to buy—to emerge from the crisis even richer. The New York Times reports that two Republican senators sold off stock affected by the pandemic before the financial crash after they learned about the bleak predictions of experts in closed-door meetings. And yet they didn't warn the public or contradict their President who ignored briefings by his own intelligence services and dismissed the pandemic as a Democratic hoax, yet another attempt to impeach him by wrecking confidence in the strong economy that would fuel his re-election. At press conferences, Trump is sparring with journalists over whether it's racist to call the new corona virus "the Chinese virus" or "Kung-flu." Meanwhile, European governments can't come up with a unified response but confiscate medical supplies to prevent them from being brought to fellow EU member states who need them just as badly. Italy has largely fended for itself—until the Chinese, as they are beginning to get the original outbreak in their own country under control, came to the rescue, filling the geostrategic void which Trump's America First politics have created.

The sense of interconnectedness which "humanity" experiences in the face of a common enemy might still be giving a warm glow to everyday life in these early days of the pandemic, but in the political sphere it hasn't even lasted for three weeks. As

the financial and medical resources to save our lives and livelihoods are growing scarcer by the day, new tears in the social fabric will pull us apart. As the recession hits, the crime rate has been predicted to rise. It won't take long for man to be a wolf to man again. COVID won't cure me of my anthropological pessimism.

Hypochondria

22 March 2020

I go downstairs for dinner with my family. I feel cold, especially as I see Kiki running around half naked in something like a super-hero cape. I wonder if something is wrong with me that I'm freezing and she isn't. Has my inner thermostat been altered? Do I develop a fever? I get so worked up about this that I start shivering while doing the dishes. Eventually, I take my temperature and it's perfectly normal. I relax and put on a sweater.

Fever

23 March 2020

Our 2-year old daughter Loretta develops a fever in the evening. We measure 39.1°C. She oscillates between being in good spirits and feeling miserable, wanting to nurse. We give her a Tylenol suppository, which helps. Her sleep is fitful, but she wakes up cheerful again, still running a temperature though.

Probably nothing serious (even though children have been reported to develop only mild symptoms of COVID-19). What I find troubling is that we have been very serious about social distancing in the past 10 days. Donya went into supermarkets twice but took all the precautions and the children stayed with me. The only time that we took

Loretta into a social space was when we went to the consulate three days ago. And we made every effort to contain the children, we cleaned their hands with hand sanitizers several times—and yet some virus seems to have slipped through. Sheer luck that it probably wasn't SARS-CoV-2.

Angry Old Lady

25 March 2020

I take our daughters to Maplecrest Park in Maplewood. As I'm pushing Loretta on her tricycle and making sure that Kiki doesn't cross busy streets on her scooter, I'm trying to talk on Skype to a Cologne friend who self-quarantined because of a soar throat. The girls get angry at me for not paying attention, so I end the conversation.

In the park, we run into an elderly lady who starts yelling at me: "Do you know what all these people are doing in the park together? Why are they here?" I say that it looks as if the group nearest to us was a family playing soccer. "Impossible!" she yells back. "I don't understand why your generation doesn't care that my generation will die of this virus!" I tell her that it took me two weeks to get my mother in Germany to understand the severity of the situation. Until a week ago, she still squeezed herself into a car with several friends to go for a walk together. She even considered attending a funeral and a church service for a neighbor whom she had disliked while he was still alive. Many of her friends, including a doctor who lives upstairs, think that the recommended social distancing measures are ridiculous. In other words, the divide isn't simply generational. That doesn't pacify the frightened old lady. My daughters are about to get upset that again I'm not paying attention to them and we have to move on.

> “I tell her that it took me two weeks to get my mother in Germany to understand the severity of the situation.”

Happy Hour

Wednesday, 25 March 2020

After another day of Zoom office hours, Zoom faculty meetings, and Zoom workshops, I tuck my daughters into bed and attend a Zoom Happy Hour with our students that I organized as department chair. Many are still in New York and hardly leave their apartments. Others have left the city to be with family in other states, in Guatemala or Singapore. Emerging as the epicenter of the pandemic, New York no longer feels safe.

Long conversation about students not being able to do any fieldwork this summer. Even if the university released their travel funds, they might not find a travel insurance covering COVID-19-related costs.

We discuss collectivizing this COVID diary. Some students are already writing their own diaries. To me, the most interesting challenge appears to be to find a form that would allow us to transition from diaries in the strict sense of the term to a jointly authored document.

Natural Historical Nightmare

Friday, 26 March 2020

At 5 a.m., my 5-year old daughter Kiki dashes into our bedroom. “Daddy, I’m scared of the cough,” she says crawling under my blanket. It seems as if she had had a nightmare. I can’t fall asleep anymore and think of Koselleck’s essay about dreams of terror during the Third Reich. History leaves its traces in our dreams and so does the natural history of SARS-CoV2.

Zoombombing

Friday, 3 April 2020

At the executive faculty meeting on Zoom, a colleague reports that his seminar had just been “zoombombed.” An intruder had used the e-mail address of a student to break into the virtual classroom wearing a gas mask and shouting at the instructor that he was nuts. The New York Times reports that this happens quite frequently now.

911

Saturday, 4 April 2020

I go for a walk in the morning before the rest of my family wakes up. I talk to my mom on FaceTime. As I get back to DeHart Park I pass by two African American ladies chatting at the bottom of a short grassy slope leading to the baseball field. One is lying on the floor with her left leg straight and her right leg bend, which looks like a position from one of my daily stretches.I’m just surprised that she would be doing this on the grass, which is still a little wet. She is wearing a face mask. Then a third person starts calling, gesturing toward the lady on the floor. Suddenly, I realize that she is injured. I climb down to her and she explains that she ran past a dog that jumped at her and she fell down the slope. She had a back operation five years ago

and has limped ever since. She appears very anxious, which I understand all too well. After experiencing the fragility of your back such even small events can be terrifying. I feel ashamed that I initially misinterpreted the situation. I call 911 and soon after the firemen arrive with face masks. They ask the injured lady – Beatrice is her name – if she had any COVID symptoms, which she denies. They pull her up and she refuses to be brought to a hospital. She seems fine, just anxious. She wants to walk home, but the firemen insist that she calls her husband to get picked up.

I meet the lady who found her two more times in the park that day and we always greet each other. The park has become such a social hub now that everybody is largely confined to their homes.

Pearl Harbor in Spring

Monday, 6 April 2020

The news keep repeating what the Surgeon General said at a press conference: this week will be like Pearl Harbor or 9/11. For many Americans, it will be one of the saddest weeks of their lives. Here in Maplewood it remains difficult to connect with such statements. It's a beautiful spring day. Trees and flowers are blooming. It's quiet (even the planes from Newark no longer fly over) and peaceful. So peaceful that I basically gave up on my COVID diary. We mostly live on the food we stocked up about a month ago and some fresh things that we order from a local supermarket. So nothing really happens here—other than that I returned my corrected proofs and compiled an index for my chimpanzee book, started working with a Zurich and a Berlin psychiatrist on an application for an EU grant on psychedelics, etc. The horrors of New York (now they are considering digging a temporary mass grave in one of the parks) seems far, far away (even though the streets are so empty now that I could get to the New School by car in 30 minutes now). It has become one of the

global epicenters of the pandemic and yet I have nothing meaningful to contribute to the Corona Diaries project. Hopefully, our students have more to report. Meeting them on Zoom in the afternoon.

“It has become one of the global epicenters of the pandemic and yet I have nothing meaningful to contribute to the Corona Diaries project.”

Ruled by Virologists

Tuesday, 7 April 2020

I listen to an op-ed podcast on *Deutschlandfunk* that claims that, in the past weeks we have been ruled by virologists, but it’s about time for politics to take over again. Assuming that politics is one social system among others, I wonder why we take the primacy of the political for granted. Because we live in a democracy rather than a technocracy or an epistocracy? Considering how many lives and livelihoods political decision-making has recently cost us, we might have to rethink our form of government – especially since the consequences of climate change creep up on us more slowly, but there is no hope for a vaccine.

While I wrote a microessay on mysticism and racism, read an article on psychedelic feminism, corresponded with two European psychiatrists about applying for an EU grant, and taught my older daughter how to ride a bicycle, 731 people died of COVID-19 in New York today. They discuss converting public parks into temporary

mass graves. Three weeks into this state of exception the horror still seems so far away in our deadend street.

Wednesday, 8 April 2020

Censored by the author

Not In the Books

Friday, 10 April 2020

My Berkeley roommate and friend Carlo Caduff, author of *The Pandemic Perhaps* twittered that in 15 years of studying pandemic preparedness he never came across plans to shut down public life globally. I ask whether he has an educated guess why that is. Did epidemiologists expect a virus with different qualities? Yes, he twitters, they expected a virus that kills millions, not just a few hundred thousand.

But that raises more questions than it answers. Wouldn't a global lockdown have been more plausible if we prepared for an even deadlier virus? And why didn't scenario planners prepare for all scenarios rather than just the worst case? If Carlo was right though, it would be fascinating to understand how governments across the world suddenly came to adopt such drastic measures. I should write an email to him and get his opinion.

> "Wouldn't a global lockdown have been more plausible if we prepared for an even

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deadlier virus?”

The Dean expresses careful optimism about reopening the university in the fall. I point out that “open” probably won’t mean a return to the pre-COVID situation. What about the many elderly professors in their 70s and 80s? Do we seriously expect them to sit in a classroom with lots of wildly socializing undergraduates? How will we even get to our offices, considering that the only way up are the crammed elevators? New York City architecture doesn’t allow much social distancing.

“New York City architecture doesn’t allow much social distancing.”

Science Is Real

Sunday, 12 April 2020

Nicolas Langlitz



Maplewood's communal Easter egg hunt has been cancelled. Instead people hang cut-out Easter eggs in their windows and add their address to a shared online spreadsheet. We take the girls on a walk through the neighborhood and Kiki keeps a tally on how many eggs she discovered.

Many of the houses that participate in the socially distant egg hunt also put up the usual insignia of American liberalism. Rainbow-colored flags and a very popular yard sign that lists all the mantras: "We believe / Black Lives Matter / No Human Is Illegal / Love is Love / Women's Rights Are Human Rights / Science Is Real."

The last line had already been an anti-populist slogan before the pandemic. Originally, it expressed opposition to climate change skepticism. In light of Trump's dismissal of SARS-CoV-2 as a Democratic hoax the post-truth debate has gained new urgency. But the "Science Is Real" signs also remind me how far the left and my own academic field have come. Roszak had defined the counterculture of the 1960s through its opposition to technocracy. This sentiment gave rise to the political project of science & technology studies, which fostered skepticism toward scientific

facts to make space for political alternatives. In the meanwhile this has become a project of the right. The COVID experience will add fuel to the fire of these new science wars. And the old guard of STS will again squirm and writhe in its attempts to reconcile their constructivism with the left's rediscovery of realism.

> "In light of Trump's dismissal of SARS-CoV-2 as a Democratic hoax the post-truth debate has gained new urgency. But the "Science Is Real" signs also remind me how far the left and my own academic field have come."

Idiotic

16 April 2020

Social distancing measures are becoming more rigid in New Jersey and NYC. Now we need to wear face masks in shops and are urged to also wear them in public. Many do. I still occasionally forget mine when I go out with the children. They also locked the soccer field. Now I have to run on the walkway outside the fence, which puts me in close contact with people going for a walk. An idiotic measure. It's the first time I feel slightly angry.

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New Life

21 April 2020

I dream of having been accepted to an MA program in Israel. In the wake of COVID, American higher education has collapsed and I have to start a new life. I must have applied indiscriminately because when the acceptance letter arrives I don't know anything about the university. I check online and their research in paleontology looks really interesting to me. I don't know anything about paleontology other than that you get to travel to excavation sites and dig out bones of extinct animal species. But I'm ready to do something entirely different.

Together with my family, I get onto a Deutsche Bahn train to Jerusalem. We realize that DB lost our suitcases. They always mess things up, but I don't mind that our old stuff is gone.

We get off at a small stop in a neighborhood full of students. It's spring and the atmosphere is relaxed and easy going. I realize that I should let my mom know that we've moved to Israel. Even in times of COVID, I'm sure she will mostly worry about the risk of a terror attack. Her risk perceptions tend to be irrational. Life seems so carefree over here.

I call the university admissions officer because I haven't received the paperwork they wanted to send by mail. He asks for my address and wants me to spell my name. I realize that I'm not spelling my own name, but a different one: S-C-H-L-A-N-K (which means *slim*). "Nicolas Schlank"? I don't know why I've given a false name. If I'm serious about this new life, I shouldn't give some alias. But maybe I did just that because I really wanted to start an entirely new life?

At least in my dreams, this crisis opens up possibilities and restores a sense of youthful expectancy.

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Cuts

Friday, 24 April 2020

The New School's new president opened his tenure with salary cuts. The university anticipates to lose $130 million in the next year and its Board of Trustees authorized a first round of cuts saving $80 million. So far, only a few people have been fired, but many workers have been furloughed until the university reopens. The reduction of my salary throws us back to the months after buying our house in 2018 when we had to devise a budget for everything, but considering that our costs for commuting, daycare, the community pool, etc. have also been eliminated, we should be able to manage. However, the university also stopped contributing to our retirement funds. Depending on how long this lasts, this might pose serious financial problems in the future.

What I'm most concerned about is that the Board could simply reduce my salary from one day to the next. If the contractually agreed upon salary can be adjusted to institutional needs, can I still rely on any other elements of my contract? I raised the question in the executive faculty meeting today and nobody had an answer. I pushed for our division to hire its own lawyer to get a clearer sense of the legal landscape, in which we're now operating.

"What I'm most concerned about is that the Board could simply reduce my salary from one day to the next."

After the meeting, I begin looking into what it would take to fire tenured professors. I had always assumed that as long as the university doesn't declare bankruptcy, tenure protected me against losing my job as long as I complied with the institution's regulations. Under the current circumstances that proves to be wrong though. If the university decided to close down departments or whole divisions, they could lay off tenured faculty in those parts of the university.

I had started the day not feeling my usually tense lower back – a rare moment of relief since I had back surgery in 2007. By the end of the day, my muscles are as hard as a board. I realize that my joyous fatalism and dreams of an MA in paleontology don't shield me against the stress that comes with a highly uncertain future. I wonder if the Stoics suffered from back problems. It would be nice if philosophy was a way of life, but I certainly don't embody mine.

Drop-out

18 August 2020

Nicolas Langlitz



I gave up on my COVID diary because I didn't have enough to report. I spent the summer with my family in our house in Maplewood, NJ. Since the local libraries remained closed and I didn't like to be stuck in my home office all day, I eventually made the forest of South Mountain Reservation my workplace. I wrote at a picnic table and read in a hammock. There continued to be a huge amount of administrative work throughout the summer break though as the university prepared a major restructuring in the wake of a COVID-induced financial crisis. So far, these Zoom meetings have really been the site where I experienced the impact of the pandemic first-hand and in ways that would be quite significant for an anthropology of knowledge. After all, American higher education will probably look very different when the dust has settled. Alas, all administrative deliberations were confidential. I protected myself against what Roland Barthes called "diary disease," the writing of supposedly private confessions with an eye to publication, by no longer writing at all.