

# “... there is an unimaginable struggle going on.”

**Berlin, Germany, 11 March - 29 May 2020**

*This diary was written by Claudia Liebelt from Wednesday, 11 March 2020, to Friday, 20 May 2020. Claudia is a Political Anthropologist interested in debates on gender and sexualities, the biopolitics of beauty and embodiment, postsecularism and new materialities, with a regional focus on the Middle East and Turkey. From October 2019–March 2020 she held a Guest Professorship of Gender and Diversity Studies at the Freie Universität Berlin. On April 1, she started working in a Heisenberg Position at the University of Bayreuth. During the lockdown, she lived with her partner and her 7-year old daughter in a 3-room apartment in Berlin-Neukölln. In mid-March, when the Corona lockdown began, she was preparing for a longer stint of field research in Turkey scheduled to begin in early April. This diary has been anonymized, that is, confidential data has been left out and contacts were given pseudonyms to make them less identifiable.*

**Wednesday, 11 March 2020**

Midmorning, I receive an email from the Chancellor of the University of Bayreuth that all teaching operations are discontinued ‘until further notice’. For lunch, I meet with a new colleague at the University of Bayreuth, who lives around the corner from me in Berlin-Neukölln. His family lives in Northern Italy in one of the first so-called ‘red zones’ that were especially hard-hit by the coronavirus. This is the first time that I feel really unsure about the appropriate form of greeting. We decide on a brief hug, albeit with a certain distance, which is certainly less intimate than a peck on the cheek as is common among Italian friends. My colleague was planning to visit his

family in Italy over Easter which now is out of the question. His brother suffers from keeping his children occupied at home all day long and they have daily video conferences now.

We meet at Caffeggiando's, our regular Italian neighbourhood café. Its owner Massimo is from Turin and his family is likewise affected by the lockdown. He worries about his mom and also about the fact that he might have to close his café in the upcoming days.<sup>[1]</sup>

### **Thursday, 12 March 2020**

I must have caught a cold from working in my unheated office on Tuesday: I wake up with a headache. My partner Ulaş takes our daughter Meira to school, I work from home.

In the afternoon I meet a colleague in a Kreuzberg gallery to see a photo exhibition about Merve, a legendary Berlin publisher. We no longer shake hands but wave at each other from a distance by way of a greeting. Over a beer in a pub next door we joke about the US president Trump's treatment of the crisis and his recent entry barrier for Europeans. My colleague, an American, tells me that his American friends are worried about him because he is now stuck in Europe. "They don't realise I actually live here," he says.

Back at home, I take a paracetamol and go to sleep. It is 5 pm in the afternoon. Is this COVID-19 already?

### **Friday 13 March 2020**

Sleeping for more than twelve hours did the miracle: I feel fine again. Meira leaves for school while in the chatroom of her classmates' parents news about an imminent closure of schools make the round. Several parents already keep their children at home today, out of fear of infection. They complain that the government reacts too slowly. Another mother writes that she's busy cleaning because 'the virus attaches itself to all kinds of surfaces'.

Shortly before noon, the official announcement about the school closures reaches me. From Tuesday until after the Easter holidays (April 20), all schools and kindergartens in Berlin will be closed. Five weeks without childcare! This is a decisive turning-point with tremendous effects on my and most of my social circle's everyday life. Within a few minutes our neighbours'-chatroom is busy with ideas on how to share childcare and establish a 'backyard-school' during the upcoming weeks.

Another email from the Chancellor of the University of Bayreuth states that each employee with children beneath the age of 12 will be granted ten days of extra holidays to cope with the temporary close down of schools. This is certainly welcome but I wonder how single parents will be able to cope with the remaining fifteen days. Everybody is advised to work at home or in tele office whenever possible. I wonder what happens to my new work contract at the University of Bayreuth which is due to begin on April 1st. About two months ago, I sent off everything I was supposed to submit but haven't heard back from them since.

In the early afternoon, a skype conference with my colleagues from the German Anthropological Association's working group "[Gender & Sexualities | Queer Anthropology](#)". We have been organizing a two-day workshop to take place next week and a few days ago decided to postpone it to early October. Now we discuss how to move on. We will try to start a virtual discussion with the workshop participants. We would also like to write a joint essay on "Queering COVID-19" about the current situation from a queer perspective, something we have been missing in the beginning debate (most of us read the Somatosphere's [COVID-19 forum](#)).

In the afternoon, Meira returns from school with an incredibly heavy school bag: She brought home everything she had in school: her sports bag, all her books and exercise books, her utensils for the art class.

Today is my friend Caro's birthday. Caro is an independent historian and publisher, who in the past few years has worked for several NS memorial sites. After some deliberations whether it is still okay to meet with a group of friends in a pub, she invited a rather small group into the backroom of a quiet pub for dinner. Out of the eight persons invited, six arrive. We sit at a distance from each other though certainly less than a metre and a half. The atmosphere is rather gloomy as the news pour in that from tomorrow onwards, all pubs will be closed in Berlin. Caro and some of the others are great fans of Christian Drosten, the director of the Berlin Charité's Institute of Virology. Caro has started listening to his regular radio podcast and is prepared for the shutdown to last several months. She and some of the others work as historians in different NS memorial sites and accordingly, they wonder what the shutdown means for their institutions and professional futures more generally. We also talk about the situation of refugees at the Greek-Turkish border. The media images from Lesbos are disturbing. From participating in a no-border camp in Lesbos in 2009, I know some of the camps that are currently on the news. Even back then the situation was unbearable for those arriving from Turkey.

### **Saturday 14 March 2020**

The weather is mild and sunny and during the afternoon there is a spontaneous meeting with the neighbours in the backyard. Most of us are unsure how to deal with the current situation. Some say they will reduce their social contacts to the people they live with as soon as the schools close down, others are not able to do so as long as they have to work. One Italian neighbour Emilia whose family in northern Italy is under quarantine already suggests to organise a mutual support system for all

neighbours. Another neighbour, Jasmin, sets up a shared online table to facilitate the collective organization of childcare in the backyard during the upcoming week.

### **Sunday, 15 March 2020**

The first real spring day of the year, everyone is out and the corona crisis and imminent lockdown seem far removed from the social reality around us. I go for a walk with Caro who was recently offered a position and, like me, wonders whether the hiring process will be processed as scheduled in spite of the current situation.

My partner Ulaş returns from running on the Tempelhof Airfield. He jokingly remarks that half of Berlin's population is hanging out there. The playgrounds are packed with families too.

At night, we watch the news for the first time ever with Meira. She is unimpressed by the discussion about travel restrictions but is sad when we tell her that due to the COVID-19 lockdowns, we will not be able to move to Istanbul anytime soon.

### **Monday, 16 March 2020**

The final day of school until at least April 20 for Meira. Out of the 21 children in Meira's class only six attend school today. She returns with a pile of copies, her homework. She is in a good mood because they had a very early Easter party with chocolates. She is happy that she was chosen to take home and care of Mo, the teacher's glove puppet, while the school is closed.

Yesterday was the deadline for submission of my students' essays and even though I extended the deadline in many individual cases, my email inbox is packed with essays. I save them into a folder on my desktop and start reading the first. Even if I

manage to read 3–4 a day, the maximum per day without childcare, I suppose, I will not finish reading them before the end of the month when my contract with the Free University ends.

## Tuesday, 17 March 2020

We meet our 90-year old neighbour, Mrs. J., with her caregiver in the hallway. We exchange telephone numbers and offer our help with shopping or other services, just in case her caregiver could no longer come. The caregiver goes to see Mrs J. once a week from an outer district to clean her flat, do the shopping, and to go for a walk with her. The caregiver is worried that she might fall ill or else is no longer able to come. Mrs. J. does not leave the house alone. She has a daughter who lives in another part of Germany and rarely comes to visit her.

Today is the first day of school and kindergarten closures in Berlin. After breakfast, we set up a weekly school schedule with Meira. We include English lessons even though she hasn't had any so far. We do so because Meira's prospective class in Istanbul started with English lessons last August. We don't want to give up on our Istanbul plans yet. We already bought the books the Istanbul school works with. In case we still manage to leave for Istanbul, I want Meira to be at least a little bit prepared. In the past few weeks we've repeatedly looked at the pictures of her prospective school and class on the internet. We've noted that one of the girls resembles one of her Berlin friends. We looked at the photo of the teacher, a youthful blonde, and wondered whether she was strict. We schedule two hours of home schooling in the morning, time in the backyard until around noon, and another hour of home schooling after lunch.

While I visualise our schedule Meira paints a picture of a huge corona virus hovering over a scene with two people sitting beneath a tree. They have large

fearful eyes and one of them exclaims ‘Aargh!’

In the afternoon, one of our neighbours receives a telephone call from the parents of their son’s best friend: his father just fell ill after visiting his sister in Munich the previous weekend. The sister has now been tested positive for COVID-19, he is still waiting for his test result to arrive. The news is discussed among the neighbours in the backyard. What if our neighbours’ son, Olle, has been infected? Two other kids who regularly play in the backyard are in the same after-school care centre, together with the potentially infected boy. Olle’s parents are rather calm, but Timm, one of the other boys regularly playing with Olle in the backyard, suffers from chronic asthma, so Timm’s parents do not wish to take unnecessary risks. Timm’s mother decides to temporarily isolate her son from the backyard group, at least until the other father’s test results have arrived.<sup>[2]</sup> From other acquaintances we know that the arrival of test results can easily take up to a week in Berlin these days. We notice how the virus becomes less abstract and slowly moves into our social circles.

A long conversation with my mother over the phone. She returned to Berlin in late January from her house in the Marches, in Central Italy. The Marches are now heavily affected by the Coronavirus outbreak and my mother tells me that her gardener thinks he already had the virus in February. Other people we know have been diagnosed and a distant acquaintance’s son, who was in his twenties, has died. My mother went into self-quarantine in mid-February because of her Asthma. Her husband continues to work in a film studio in Cologne and stays in Berlin over the weekend. We used to see each other at least once a week for a joint lunch at the Centro Italia, an Italian supermarket and restaurant close to where they live. It’s almost a month now that we haven’t been able to get together. My mother continues her translation work and she also keeps herself busy by tending to her garden, she says.

## Wednesday, 18 March 2020

I continuously receive emails from students explaining why they were unable to submit their essays in time. A French student describes how she was able to catch one of the last flights to Paris, but then waited for two days until she was finally able to catch a train to her family's place in Southern France. Due to the restrictive lockdown in France she worries that she will not be able to post a printed version of the essay. I set up an email to all students explaining that they no longer need to worry about mailing their essays in addition to the digital copy.

In the past few days, I received Coronavirus regulation updates from the Chancellor of the University of Bayreuth on an almost daily basis. Today, I receive three official messages from the university. In the first message we are told that all cafeterias and libraries will stay closed until further notice. In the second all employees with experiences in the health sector are requested to come forward. In the final one the Chancellor speaks of great challenges ahead of us, the "academic family".

During the afternoon, I make pottery with some of the kids in the backyard. After about two hours I have a large collection of little pots, hedgehogs, hearts, and fantastic animals, which I take to the workshop of my friend Einat, a ceramicist. Upon leaving the workshop another friend enters. She looks worried and hardly says hello. At night, I receive a message from her. She apologises and explains that she was extremely stressed out. Her flatmate was stuck in Munich for days after an odyssey from Spain.

Some of our neighbours have created a WhatsApp-group called "Playing in the Backyard," which includes all neighbours whose children regularly use the backyard. This is the beginning of a debate on how to use the backyard during the lockdown. Some families went into self-quarantine already. Others wonder whether we should form smaller groups or self-restrict our kids' access to the backyard. It is difficult to imagine what we would do if Meira, who is incredibly energetic, lost her access to



the backyard. We watch the evening news and chancellor Merkel's speech with Meira. Meira repeats her main sentence "The situation is serious, please do take it serious", imitating her earnest facial expression and then bursting into laughter. Watching the news with Meira means that you have to watch them again after she's asleep if you wish to listen to more than a few fragments.

### Thursday 19 March 2020

Today would have been Day 1 of an inaugural workshop titled "Queer Openings" that I co-organized with five colleagues at the FU Berlin. I had been looking forward to this for so long! Like so many other workshops and public events, ours has not been cancelled but postponed to early October.<sup>[3]</sup>

Concluding our two-day workshop in a public round table event at the Schwules Museum Berlin (Berlin Gay Museum), we were hoping to discuss the state and future of Queer Studies within the wider German-speaking academy. Our four speakers would have discussed the reception and politics of Queer Studies amidst a political climate in which right-wing populists discredit the work many of us do. Instead of holding the public event, we created a closed group for discussion on a social media platform for the workshop's participants. The discussion hasn't really started yet; while it seemed like such a timely and relevant debate just a few days ago, today it seems rather remote from what is happening all around us. Everybody seems to be busy organizing their everyday lives in this early phase of the coronavirus outbreak in Germany. In my case, this means home-schooling and entertaining a rather energetic seven-year-old who does not comprehend why all of a sudden we can no longer visit her grandmother or go to the public playground at the corner.

For almost a week now I receive daily updates from the presidents of the two universities I am currently employed by, the Freie Universität Berlin, the FU, and the

University of Bayreuth. Today, there are multiple announcements from both sides. After the second email from the president of the FU, I realize that as of tomorrow, the university will shut down almost completely and that if I don't clear up my office today, I might not be able to do so anymore since my transponder will be blocked and my contract with the FU terminates by the end of the month. I leave Meira with the neighbours in the backyard and take the car to empty my office on the other side of town, in Dahlem. Listening to Deutschlandfunk, the major public-broadcasting radio station in Germany, on the way, I have the feeling that a public curfew is only days if not only hours away. Commentators report about careless young people in 'certain parts of Berlin' socialising freely in parks and cafés, obviously not sticking to the chancellor's request to stay at home as announced on German public service television the night before. They most likely speak about our neighbourhood (among others): the Landwehrkanal is packed with people enjoying the first days of spring.

In Dahlem, the streets are rather empty, as usual. I work hard to quickly fill the cardboard boxes that I stored away in the little storage room at one side of my office after moving in six months earlier. I will miss this place and my colleagues, but now is not the right time to sentimentalize. Having packed everything, I move on to the department's secretariat to return my laptop and transponder. On the doors of the institute's villa, large signs tell students to STOP due to the coronavirus. The secretary and the study coordinator are also busy packing and getting things done before moving into home office the day after. We don't shake hands anymore and U put the flowers that I brought to say good bye on the desk between us. It is difficult to say goodbye to someone you grew attached to without any physical contact.

### **Friday, 20 March 2019**

After a first round of home schooling, my daughter Meira disappears into the backyard, singing her new earworm, which she brought home from school (a

bilingual Turkish-German school), in Turkish: “Corona, Corona, everywhere Corona; I put on a mask: Corona; Corona! Corona, everywhere Corona.”

Instead of meeting my PhD student in my office yesterday, we now have a video call with her sitting in her apartment in Zurich. We discuss our upcoming research project, which will hopefully take her to conduct ethnographic fieldwork in China. However, it is rather unlikely that China will grant entry to Europeans in the near future. Also, when will the University of Bayreuth approve of business travels to China again? Like my own field research to Turkey which was scheduled to begin in early April, her research plans are currently on hold. She is clearly worried. In contrast to Berlin, where the ‘transitioning to minimal on-site operation’ as it is officially known, took place during the semester break, in Zurich, where she teaches, the semester is in full swing. Since Friday she is required to teach online and having little experience in teaching, struggles to manage the sudden transition.

Listening to the radio while preparing lunch, I realize that the curfews are getting closer, with Bavaria and the Saarland being the first federal states to introduce at least partial curfews. Then a WhatsApp message arrives in the parents’ chat group of Meira’s class, showing the website of the Berlin Federal Bureau for Public Health and Welfare, the LaGeSo, announcing a Berlin-wide curfew from Monday morning. Within a minute another parent exposes the posting as a fake; indeed, when I check the LaGeSo’s official website, it already features a warning.

In the early afternoon I venture outside for the first time today to post some letters. I do so in a nearby kiosk rather than the post office which is usually crowded during this time of the day. On my way back, I chat with a neighbour who leans out of the window smoking a cigarette and listening to music in an otherwise quiet street. When I tell her about the fake LaGeSo website she tells me another incredible story: apparently, a group of men in protective clothing currently goes from door to door claiming to be health officials and requesting that people take (fake) corona tests for which they then charge a fee. She has heard the story from a friend.

For dinner, I prepare a challah and light candles like I usually do on Friday nights, the beginning of the Jewish shabbat. It feels good to stick to this weekly ritual even during these turbulent times. Our dinner for three makes us remember those we miss and usually have dinner with on Friday nights. Meira misses her grandma who is home alone in another part of Berlin, in self-quarantine since mid-February due to her chronic asthma. For the second consecutive day at 9 pm several neighbours applaud from their windows in solidarity with the medical staff treating those suffering from Covid-19.

### **Saturday 21 March 2020**

The first week of home schooling is over and Meira is obviously getting bored with staying at home or in the backyard all the time. We discuss cycling to the Tempelhof Airfield and try to explain why we would not be able to stop at her favourite toy shop and café on the way. Taking out our bikes we notice that other neighbours decided likewise to take their kids to a bike trip. In contrast to last weekend when thousands of residents flocked to the former airfield, causing much moral outrage in the wider German public about the careless Berliners not acting responsibly in the current crisis, this morning it is rather empty. Perhaps due to the cloudy sky and fresh breeze. The few groups we encounter, mostly couples and families with smaller children, move in distance from each other, mostly on bikes or inline skates. Even after the sun comes out in the afternoon, the public playground around the corner remains almost empty. In normal times on a sunny Sunday afternoon it would be crowded with dozens, possibly more than a hundred people.

Instead, we stick to the backyard of our gated housing complex which has its own playground. The housing complex we live in was built in the 1920s by the visionary Bruno Taut, an avantgarde urban planner/architect and an early follower of the Garden City movement. Hence, the complex is built around a large backyard,

complete with a lawn, a playground, a little hut for garden tools, vegetable and flower beds that we care for collectively, as well as numerous large trees and bushes, perfect for hiding and climbing. Early on in the process of the COVID-19 crisis and the public appeals to stay at home the regular users of our backyard, nine families with their small children, started discussing on how to deal with the situation as a community and how to keep on using it. Most of us decided that we would not try to keep our kids inside the house all the time but would like to continue using the backyard together. Two families have since withdrawn from the backyard, one because they sought to minimise their physical contacts even further and another, because they felt they were too exposed in their professional lives to intermingle with the rest of us.<sup>[4]</sup> The remaining families agreed on reducing their own as well as their children's social contacts to an absolute minimum outside of the housing community, at least since all schools and kindergartens closed down on March 17th. We decided to meet in the backyard exclusively, keeping physical distance from each other and try to explain to our kids to do so as well.

Nevertheless, the degrees of self-quarantine among us vary and the debate about intermingling in the backyard continues. Some have proposed to use the backyard in shifts of regular groups of kids to minimise the risk of infection. For the time being, however, the housing community is a great relief in everybody's quarantine-like everyday lives. Thus, we take turns in entertaining and supervising the children for two hours in the morning and two to three hours in the afternoon. Most of us work at home these days. We've supported each other with shopping, taken comfort in each other's concerns and anxieties and exchanging news and jokes via social media. Also, on March 16 and 17, we've provided the elderly in our respective housing units with our phone numbers, offering them to be available for general support or shopping. Before we return inside this afternoon one neighbour fetches a bottle of exquisite whisky to cheer us up in light of the gloomy news of 800 new corona deaths in Italy. Standing at a distance from each other we toast to the eventual passing of the pandemic. At 7 o'clock that evening a much larger number of

neighbours as compared to yesterday pays respect to the medical personnel by applauding from their open windows.

For the first time I see queues in front of the local supermarket due to the fact that it started to limit the number of persons allowed inside.

### **Sunday, 22 March 2020**

Over breakfast my partner Ulaş reads out the news from Turkey where those aged 65 and above are no longer permitted to board a plane. This also affects his parents, who live on the Aegean coast in the province of Bodrum; they write that they were told to stay at home and nowadays leave the house for shopping only. Bodrum is a popular holiday resort for Istanbul's upper middle class. In the past few days they claim the town has been 'flooded' with *Istanbullus* seeking refuge from the potentially infected city. In Turkey the spread of the epidemic has long been denied and officially confirmed numbers are still a few hundred only while many seem to go unnoticed. Ulaş spends much time on getting information about the situation in Turkey. There are reports about the rise of conspiracy theories, often with an **anti-semitic undertone**.

I get samples of such theories from the WhatsApp chat group of the parent support association of our daughter's school, a bilingual Turkish-German school, with an overwhelming majority of parents from a Turkish cultural background: yesterday evening one mother posted a link to a website called Eurasia Diary and begins her message (in Turkish) with a question: "Could this be a coincident?" She then goes on to explain that two US American publications from the 1980s, *The End of Days* and *The Eyes of Darkness*, have predicted the pandemic and that a 'certain group' which holds secret power within the US state and is linked to the Rockefeller family network is interested in an economic global breakdown to introduce its own digital

currency. The posting is incredibly long, quotes a number of Turkish “experts” with academic titles and ends with the assumption that the current situation has been planned by ‘secret forces’ from within the US to harm the global economy and especially Turkey. I am reminded of the conspiracy theories that I encountered during field research in Turkey in 2013–2014 which I found deeply disturbing for their rampant and rather open antisemitism.

I try to concentrate on reading student papers and answering emails. Every day now I receive emails from students explaining why they were unable to submit their papers in time, asking for an extension of the deadline. Today, a student explains that she is in quarantine waiting for the result of her COVID-19 test because she used to work at the reception of a hostel that accommodated someone tested positive. She obviously is too depressed to work on her essay.

Meeting some of the neighbours in the backyard during the afternoon while news from a meeting of Chancellor Merkel and the heads of the Federal Governments pour in, we discuss the use of the backyard in the upcoming week once more. While the regulations relate to public space exclusively we nevertheless decide to split into two groups, one comprising six children from four households in the morning and the other comprising the same number of kids from three households in the afternoon. We also draft a letter to the other neighbours explaining our decision as one that hopefully comes across as responsible. When we explain to Meira that from tomorrow on we could not use the backyard during the afternoons she tells us ‘I don’t care. I will go to there whenever I want to’.

### **Monday 23 March 2020**

This has been a rather frustrating and tiring day, the first day of the federal government’s tighter regulations regarding the COVID-19 outbreak. After a first



round of home-schooling in the morning I have a long conference call with our neighbours from our “playing in the backyard” group about how to go on. It is clear to all of us that while public playgrounds are closed and groups of more than two (unrelated) individuals are not allowed to gather in public we cannot go on using the backyard the way we did until yesterday. For some, using the playground with six kids simultaneously, as planned only yesterday, also seems out of the question today. The atmosphere of discussion is tense and each of us feels threatened by the prospect of losing access to the garden. Some are anxious that the other neighbours could report us to the property management or even the police if we continue to share using the space with kids who do not keep physical distance from each other. After some lengthy debates and a collective reading of yesterday’s regulations we divide our kids into four groups, each using the garden for up to 1.5 hours a day. Each group will comprise one adult with their own and another household’s children. For us, like for everyone else, this will create an entirely different childcare situation. It means that we have less time to work during the day, we will need to work longer at night and get less sleep. One neighbour, who lives with her husband and three kids in a two-room flat, says that without the backyard and the regulations in place she is afraid they might eventually kill each other. This is meant as a joke, but the desperate undertone in her voice cannot be overheard.

In the afternoon, we go for another cycling tour with Meira. It is a freezing but sunny Monday; it feels more like a Sunday though. There is little traffic and bicycles seem to have taken over the street. Many shops are closed and there are long queues in front of the supermarkets.

At night, I talk to a friend from Jerusalem. The regulations they are subject to are rather similar to ours; however, they are much more tightly controlled and are not supposed to move away too far from their registered address. Schools there closed right after the Jewish carnival, Purim, about two weeks ago. Her husband who works in tourism has taken his annual leave and will have to register as unemployed if the



travel ban continues until May.

## Tuesday 24 March 2020

My daughter Meira's timeslot for using the garden is from 10.30 am until noon. After a first round of home schooling, Meira packs her backpack, waits until the kids of the first garden shift return inside and storms outside to reunite with her friend Raya. The playground has been cordoned off and two parents from neighbouring housing units are already drafting a letter to the property management asking them to remove the barrier tape, explaining our scheme. In the afternoon we see that the children have already made creative use of the barrier tape. On my way downstairs to unlock the door leading to the backyard for Meira, I check the mailbox: again, no letter from the University's Human Resource Department. I am waiting for forms that I need to fill in so that my work contract can be finalized. The secretary responsible for this claims that she sent them out on Thursday and that the postal office is currently overburdened. My work contract is due to begin in six days, on April 1st. Obviously, the Human Resource Department started to process my documents which were submitted in mid-January, way too late. Most administrative secretaries have moved into home office by now and the university mail is fetched irregularly. I find it difficult to understand why these forms cannot be sent out in digital form via email. What worries me most is that in case my work contract does not begin on the first of April and depending on my future salary, I might not be covered by medical insurance after March 31st.

I spend almost an hour on the phone with various secretaries from the insurance company and the university before Meira wisely persuades me to paint something with her. We fabricate a birthday card for my brother who lives in Vienna and leave the house to post it. Meanwhile, the kiosk where we used to post our mail has closed. When we see the incredibly long queue in front of the post office we return home

without having achieved much. On the way back we have a long chat with the regular beggar in front of our supermarket. He has had a cough for quite a long time and notices that in the past few days people started avoiding him even more than usually. Due to his ill health he is scared to be infected and knows that by standing in front of the supermarket he is rather exposed to the virus. However, he depends on the money and has no choice. He asks me to buy a box of tea bags for him, flavour lemon-ginger.

In the afternoon, a long phone call with a friend, Mona, to whom we sublet our former rented flat around the corner (when we moved out of the flat two years ago, this was the easiest way to make sure our friend would get the flat). After several letters and phone calls in January, the house owner finally agreed to officially rent out the flat to Mona but requested an inspection prior to changing the contract. We agreed on a date in early April but due to the fact that Mona, who has just returned from India, is currently under quarantine, this now has to be postponed. She tells me about her stressful and exhausting journey back from Mumbai: several planes were cancelled and when the German embassy finally decided to evacuate its remaining citizens, she was waitlisted for another three days. In the airport Mona met one of my colleagues from the University of Bayreuth who was likewise on his way back from fieldwork. They are both desperate about the missed opportunity to do fieldwork and unsure whether they will be able to afford postponing it. Mona is deeply worried about the spread of the virus in India; at night a TV report about the spread of the coronavirus in India confirms much of what she told me, namely that the urban poor are especially at risk because they have to deal not only with the medical but also with the severe economic effects of the strict COVID-19 lockdown.

At night, a conference call with my colleagues doesn't work out. Another conference call with friends in Israel does work out but it leaves me rather depressed. According to plan they would have been busy packing their bags to come and stay with us in Berlin while we would have left for Istanbul the week after.

Before going to sleep I read and sign a petition initiated by a group of professors two days ago demanding a 'non-semester.' This means the semester should not 'count' in order to create space for those students (and teaching staff) who have childcare or other care obligations as well as problems with their visa or residence permit due to the COVID-19 epidemic.

### Wednesday 25 March 2020

In the morning after home schooling and while Meira is in the backyard with Raya, the only friend and neighbour she still sees, I continue to correct student essays. I manage to read 2–3 a day but instead of getting smaller, the pile of essays that sits on my desk keeps on growing. I hope not to run out of ink for the printer. If I do, I might have to violate my self-imposed Amazon boycott.

In the afternoon Meira, accompanied by Ulaş, has an appointment with a dentofacial orthopaedist and returns with her first braces. She is excited and hyper, constantly taking it out and putting it back. It is my brother's birthday today and we have a zoom conference with him, my mother and her husband as well as my sister and family. With a curfew in place in Austria since March 16th, my brother was forced to move into home office a while ago. His employer, an architectural firm in Vienna, had his computer and documents delivered to his apartment the day the curfew was announced. He jokes that he probably works more now that he stays at home than he did when he was in the office. He misses playing table soccer with his colleagues during breaks in the afternoon. My sister and her father, both actors, laughingly tell us about the scenes they did before the shooting stopped. How does one act a heated argument when one's film partner is filmed separately? Apparently, some soap opera's screenplays are currently rewritten to allow to take up the shooting as soon as possible.

Eventually, my work contract and a large file of documents have arrived! It takes about two hours to sign and fill in everything. In order to avoid the post office, I follow a friend's advice and buy stamps online for the first time. I take the envelope to the post box straight away. On my way there I notice that the streets are much more crowded than they used to be two days ago when the restrictions were still new.

I chat with a Turkish friend in the UK. She tells me that she thinks the German government, in contrast to the British one, is doing a fantastic job. I tell her that we've all become followers of Drosten Süperstar and send her a link to an article about him in [The Guardian](#). Among my friends, many indeed have become great fans of Christian Drosten, the director of the Berlin Charité's Institute of Virology, and I too regularly listen to his radio podcast.

### Thursday 26 March 2020

In normal times I would have left to clear out my father's house in Southern Germany tomorrow or on Saturday. My father died last summer and I didn't have the time or capacity yet to clear out the house. About a month ago I made an appointment for early next week with a team of house clearance specialists from the Workers' Welfare Association. I talk to them on the phone and the responsible person tries to persuade me to stick to the appointment, probably because in the current situation they need the income. However, during the day I grow increasingly nervous about the prospect of driving 700 kilometres through Germany. I hear reports about Berliners being sent back to Berlin by police officers from other federal states. I check the regulations of the states on the way to my father's house and realise that in contrast to Berlin, they all have rather strict curfews. In Saxony-Anhalt and Bavaria it is okay to organise a change of flat (which is somewhat comparable to receiving a team of house clearance specialists) but it is not allowed

to travel to one's second home (this rule was probably introduced to keep people from the urban centres to move into their holiday homes on the northern islands and in southern Germany in large numbers). I try to find out whom to contact about an autobahn transit through Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt and Bavaria. The only official number that I find is from the Government of Saxony-Anhalt; it is busy all the time. I write emails to the different states' Ministries of the Interior briefly describing my case but do not seriously expect an answer before tomorrow. I should probably cancel the appointment right away. I try not to think about my father's well-groomed garden which has probably turned into a jungle by now (in the middle of a residential neighbourhood with very well-groomed gardens).

Today, I manage to read only two student essays and I feel that more and more things to do are piling up on my desk. I take Meira for a long walk to Krumme Lanke instead, a beautiful forest lake in western Berlin. Another gleam of light is the publication of a blog post that came out of one of my seminars. It is published on the wonderful [Encounter blog](#) and deals with places of beauty consumption and bodily wellness as spaces of social encounters in the city. In the current situation, this sounds like a story from another age!

### **Friday 27 March 2020**

I cancel the trip to my father's house. At the moment, a trip to the other end of Germany seems just too risky. Instead, I call my cousin, who lives close to the house. Her husband was tested positive for COVID-19 yesterday and is in bed with high fever. She takes care of their three kids and sounds rather desperate. At the same time her mother, my aunt, is in the local hospital's intensive care unit after a cardiac valve operation. Her condition was critical for over a week and while she is now slowly recovering, her heart insufficiency is ongoing. For almost two weeks the hospital no longer allows for visitors. My cousin tries to reach a carer or nurse every

day to find out about her mother's condition. After this phone call it is difficult to return to work. I manage to read just one student essay during Meira's time in the backyard today.

In the afternoon, a walk with a friend, Anna, who hasn't been outside for the past ten days. We take a stroll through Treptower Park, next to river Spree and she is surprised by the fact that many people are out. Anna works as a bookseller in a renown independent book store in a posh neighbourhood in Berlin's West. She is currently on holidays. She was planning to visit our mutual friend Inesh in the UK, but had to cancel her trip. I tell her that the friend she was planning to visit, a medical doctor, has now been called up to serve in a London clinic. She hasn't even called him to tell him that she cancelled her trip because this seemed so obvious. Anna is a bit anxious about returning to work in the following week, especially about using the subway. She muses about cycling, which would take her about 50 minutes one way.

Today, I prepare two challahs and give one to our friends, an Israeli-American couple, who live a few hundred metres down the road. The challah handover takes place by the canal. As we sit on a bench and chat, we watch a team of policemen going up to people sitting on another bench telling them to move on. We quickly do. At night, my friend Caro complains on facebook that, lazing around in a park during the afternoon, she was approached by a team of policemen telling her that she was supposed to come to the park for sports only. I wonder whether it would have helped to tell them she was meditating. How do you define sports anyway? We joke that after all, playing chess is recognized as sports by the International Olympic Committee. Indeed, in contrast to many other federal states in Germany, in Berlin one has to have a convincing reason for leaving the house. Listening to music or reading a book in a park is obviously not enough of a reason. On my way home, I see other teams of patrolling police.

After dinner, we watch my father's old slides. There are several thousand of them



and I want to select some for digitalization. Watching slides from my parents' journeys to Austria, southern Tyrol, and Italy in the late 1960s, we miss travelling. We tell Meira that once the epidemic is over we will take her to Rome. We think of my mother's house in the Marches that stands empty these days and wonder whether we will be able to go there during the summer as we usually do.



*Watching slides of past journeys, here to Venice in the late 1960s (Photo: C. Liebelt).*

At about 8 pm, like the night before at about 2 am, an ambulance stops in front of our house, no sirens but emergency lights on. A team of paramedics enters our house. I keep Meira from running out. She wonders if someone died, remembering the

"... there is an unimaginable struggle going on."

<https://boasblogs.org/curarecoronadiaries/there-is-an-unimaginable-struggle-going-on/>

ambulance and paramedics that entered our house when her grandfather died while staying with us eight months ago. We try to comfort her but I wonder whether this is related to the outbreak of COVID-19. I breathe a sigh of relief when they move past our floor, worrying about Mrs. J., our 90-year old neighbour living next door. Perhaps the Turkish gentleman on the third floor, who has had heart surgery three months ago?

### **Saturday 28 March 2020**

In the afternoon our friend Jasmin, who lives on the fourth floor, returns from hospital. I talk to her from the balcony: tidying up something in her kitchen, she fell from a chair and slashed open her underarm. Luckily a friend was around to call an ambulance. Her arm is in a plaster cast now. I am somewhat relieved that no COVID-19 patients were taken from our house (yet..).

During Meira's hour in the backyard I read students' essays, edit the second part of a blog post written by my students, and answer emails related to my position of review editor for an anthropological journal, the Sociologus. I've become rather efficient in time management, but still, things keep on piling up. I was hoping to write an article with colleagues from the German Anthropological Association's Gender & Sexuality | Queer Anthropology working group that I am part of but can't find the time to do so. In the afternoon I manage to read a friend's latest publication which has been lying on my desk for quite a while and take a walk with Meira. Watching slides at night, again from Southern Tyrol and Italy. The images of carefree holidays serve as a stark contrast to the mediated images of COVID-19 related deaths and hospital scenes. Especially disturbing today are the images of convoys of military vehicles transporting bodies in northern Italy.

While Ulaş goes to sleep early these days, exhausted from hanging out at home and



spending time with Meira who is full of energy as usual, I stay up longer from day to day. After everyone went to sleep I watch an excellent and inspiring documentary about Donna Haraway, *Story Telling for Earthly Survival*. She argues that what matters perhaps most in these existential times –referring to the climate emergency– is what kind of stories we tell each other. This rings true in the current pandemic and it is moving in its empathy and simplicity; are our visions utopian or dystopian, are we telling each other stories of empathy and solidarity, or of an egomaniac survival of the fittest? I can't wait to discuss the film with my new "FemaleFutures"-group, that some of my neighbours set up (we have a zoom date for this on Wednesday).

### **Sunday 29 March 2020**

The clock has been switched to summertime and we get up late. Breakfast while reading the newspapers that have piled up during the week. While Meira is playing with her friend in the backyard I return to my laptop. Time to work has become just too precious to not work on a Sunday. The first email this morning is from the German Rail Service: they agree to refund my tickets for a journey to Passau where I was supposed to lecture a few days ago. It took them a while to respond to my request: I cancelled the trip on March 12!

With the raucous noise of helicopters in the air and the clouded weather, the atmosphere is rather gloomy today. In the afternoon Meira and me create a story out of random words cut out from the weekend magazine of our regular newspaper, the taz. There is a competition to win and it makes her practice her reading skills. We leave the house with inline skates to skate on a nearby school yard. It is cold and windy and the parks and streets are empty today. We meet our neighbours from downstairs whose son wears roller skates likewise; they tell me that they leave the house for the first time in 15 days. The mother says: 'Now we know that we're clean!'

There is an online demo between 4-6 pm under the hashtag #leavenoonebehind to show solidarity with those stuck in Greek refugee camps and demand that they be evacuated and taken up by Germany. Shortly after 6 pm I realise that this slipped my mind. I'm disappointed by myself. If this would have been a 'real' demo, I don't think I would have missed it.

The rest of our day is spent like most Sundays: Meira takes a shower and over dinner we watch the weekly children's series *The Show with the Mouse*.

### Monday, 30 March 2020

Home schooling as usual; reading student papers, book reviews and writing emails while Meira is in the backyard with her friend Raya, her little brother, and their mother Vera. Picking her up, I hand over two material things to Vera that best describe my current everyday life. Vera is a visual artist and has started working on a photographic series of still lives with objects and short texts describing peoples' lives during the Corona lockdown. In my case this is the pen that I use for marking essays and a slide box. The one I hand over to Vera contains rather old slides from my grandfather with metal framing and glass rather than plastic.

Shortly before noon a conference call with colleagues from our "[Gender & Sexualities | Queer Anthropology](#)" group. We were planning to write a joint piece on *Queering COVID-19* (working title) but to my great regret I have to tell them that due to the lack of childcare I do not have the capacities to do so.<sup>[5]</sup>

In the meanwhile, the lockdown has officially been extended to at least April 20th but from listening to leading politicians on the radio and in talk shows it is already becoming apparent that this is not the end date yet.

In the afternoon I meet my friend Caro for a walk. Caro was offered a position

several weeks ago, but her contract has not yet arrived. In the past few weeks, she was affected by a loss of earnings related to the cancellation and postponement of public events, which is why she decided to submit a request to access the “Rettungszuschuss Corona,” the Corona rescue package by the Berlin Senate offering up to 14,000 EUR of financial relief to the self-employed and tradespersons. She just submitted the request and received an email telling her that she is in the waiting line and that once it is her turn, she will have 35 minutes to fill in the online form. Her waiting number is above 10,000 and a little walking person moving forward rather slowly in a grey digital bar visualises her progress. During the afternoon a large number of Berlin friends post their ridiculously high waiting numbers on facebook. One missed his time slot for filling in the form and was waitlisted again, with a waiting number well above 100,000. At night my friend Caro has succeeded and been granted 5,000 EUR of relief aid. She perceives the procedure as overall rather unbureaucratic. The next morning the breakdown of the online platform for the request of the rescue package as well as its problems with data security have made it into the news of Radio Germany.

At night, we watch slides from my parents’ journey to Austria in the late 1960s.

## Tuesday, 31 March 2020

The debate among the neighbours about the use of our backyard starts anew. Some are unhappy with the timing of the slots, others wish to spend time there both in the mornings and in the afternoons. Others still warn about being perceived as irresponsible by the neighbours. Conversations take place over the phone, in the backyard or upon meeting each other in the neighbourhood. Our self-set 2-households-maximum rule in the backyard doesn’t hold anymore and one of the neighbours invites us to another (virtual) meeting for discussion. She is in favour of a more relaxed usage of the backyard and in support of her position sends a link to

### Christian Drosten's daily podcast.

Meira returns from the backyard with a bleeding wound. While climbing onto the garden hut, her leg got caught on a rusty nail. I disinfect the wound and try to take out the nail with a pair of tongs.

In the meanwhile, our field research trip to Turkey has sadly moved into an unknown and ever more distant future, with the situation in Turkey increasingly out of control. I write to the private school in Istanbul, where under normal circumstances Meira would have started school the following Monday and request that they return the tuition fees, several thousand Euros, that we had to pay beforehand in order to prove to Meira's Berlin school that she will be schooled during our absence. To my great relief they refund the money within an hour. Over lunch we discuss what to do if the school closure continues until after April 20th. Ulaş will have to teach and if he still has access to his office at university he will go there for two days a week. Luckily, I still have the option to retreat to my private office which I share with Caro in a collectively-run cultural centre in Kreuzberg, the Mehringhof, on the remaining days.

At night a video conference with some of my colleagues from the University of Bayreuth. One PhD student from Ruanda is feeling ill and currently waiting for the result of his COVID-19 test. While he himself stays in Bayreuth, he tells us about the situation in Ruanda, talking to his family on the phone every day now. Ruanda has one of the strictest corona curfews in Africa. We talk about visiting parents over Easter; most will not but one PhD student says she will, no matter what.

### Wednesday, 1 April 2020

In the morning, I talk to the person responsible for my work contract at the University of Bayreuth. She tells me that it has arrived and been dealt with, which is a

great relief. As expected, I haven't finished reading my Berlin students' essays; nevertheless, the pile of essay to read is getting smaller. In the afternoon, I go for a walk with my friend Anna. We walk in the streets rather than beside the canal, because the sidewalk next to the canal is too crowded. We take note of the many flyers pinned on many front doors. Many shops have posted signs on their doors announcing delivery services. One group announces "Self-organization against the virus of control," calling for civil disobedience and a collective sabotage of forced evictions in the neighbourhood. The flyer is published by a group that also publishes a blog which translates "solidly united against Corona". It demands, among other things, an extension of health care services, the ongoing full payment of wages even in the case of temporary closures, a stop of forced evictions, full transparency of public measures as well as the freedom of movement and speech. Likewise visible in public space is a flyer by the local division of the Left Party with rather similar demands, including the demand for opening up empty hotels and offices for the homeless, refugees and those living in overcrowded flats. This makes sense to me. It makes me think of an empty hotel turned refugee camp in Nazareth that I visited many years ago as part of an anti-deportation network in Tel Aviv. While the media reported about refugees being accommodated in a 'luxury' hotel, I remember the hotel as a rather gloomy place, unfunctional for the needs of families and far from any kind of luxury.

I complete a survey by the Berlin Social Science Center (WZB) on the [Corona Quotidian](#).

At night, instead of talking about the documentary film on Donna Haraway, a lengthy video conference with some of our neighbours about the usage of our backyard. We agree about sticking to the smaller groups but also about allowing two groups into the backyard simultaneously, as long as they stick to different corners. Our Italian neighbour Emilia looks worried and rather depressed; she tells us about her mother's neighbours in northern Italy, who have been taken to the hospital with serious

breathing problems. Also, due to the fact that her mother can no longer regularly visit, her grandmother has been moved to a care home with no one from the family allowed to visit.

### Thursday, 2 April 2020

A message from Meira's teacher has been forwarded to the parents' WhatsApp-group: she asks all parents to encourage their children to read, work on the sheets she distributed and register in the online learning platform "Anton app." We already did so a few days ago and Meira loves to work with the app. Since we usually restrict her access to videos, TV or digital games (she hardly ever plays online games except during holidays in Turkey, with her cousins), she is excited to be granted access to the tablet on a regular basis. I notice that she is extremely ambitious in completing the tasks given to her in the App. If she goes on to work on it for more than forty minutes, she gets increasingly tense. It is difficult to explain to her that she shouldn't do too much and that an hour a day is more than enough. I still sit down with her to work with her exercise book and other learning materials. Most of all, we paint: on Monday, we attached a huge sheet of paper to the wall and sketched things that we projected on it with the slide projector.

The teacher sounds worried and according to her message out of 22 children only 9 have registered for the app, one week after she sent around the access information. In Israel and the US, we learn from friends, online learning platforms were also introduced but quickly cancelled after it became clear that not all parents (and children) have access to them. I'm quite sure that each of the children in Meira's class has access to a tablet or computer with internet connection. However, some of the parents obviously neither had the time nor the inclination to register. The teacher also announces that she will invite some parents to individual meetings at the school, to discuss home-schooling.

At night, we watch slides again. My grandfather's 75th birthday. I take pictures of some slides that show my cousin, who is now sick at home with COVID-19, and her mother, in an intensive care unit after a difficult cardiac valve operation. I send them to my cousin via WhatsApp, also asking how she feels. She replies that she is slowly recovering, but that her husband's condition is unchanged. Their older daughter is also sick with fever. Neighbours deliver food to their front door.

### Friday, 3 April 2020

The pile of student essays to read is slowly shrinking. I hope that once it's gone I will be able to read at least some of the books on my long reading list, Rosi Braidotti, Esther Newton, Elisabeth Povinelli, and Mel A. Chen's *Animacies*. I write to the publisher about the long-promised reviews of my book manuscript.

Like the previous week, I prepare two challahs but it turns out that my friend Yanai has already prepared challah by himself. He comes around to bring us some stuffed wine leaves that he prepared. They are delicious. Yanai is the first visitor we have had in weeks. He keeps his jacket on and stands next to the open balcony door, but we do have a glass of wine together while the challah bakes in the oven and Ulaş prepares dinner. Meira is excited and we have to repeatedly tell her to keep physical distance from Yanai.

I talk to my mum about a virtual Passover dinner the following Wednesday. Also, I talk to my uncle. His wife, my aunt, who a few weeks ago has had a difficult cardiac valve operation, has been moved from the intensive care to the palliative care unit of the hospital. This comes as a shock. For weeks, we've been receiving news about the progress of her health condition. These little progresses, reported to my cousin by a regular carer, were only half the truth, it now becomes clear. As my uncle tells me the news, his voice is shaking. I cannot imagine him crying and even the fact that his



voice is shaking is difficult to reconcile with the image that I have of him. I remember the phone conversation we had after my father, his only brother, died. In spite of being audibly devastated by the news, his voice did not crack like it does now. Even though I've never been especially close to him, I feel like hugging him. I feel relieved when he tells me that his son is on his way from Hamburg with his wife.

Now that my aunt's life is coming to an end, the hospital allows close family members in for visits. Accordingly, for the first time in the past three weeks or so, he was allowed to enter the hospital and see her this afternoon. As he sat next to her bed, talking to her and holding her hand, she dozed away. They will start treating her with morphine tonight and most likely, she will respond even less tomorrow. My heart aches for my cousin, sick with COVID-19, who might not be able to see her mom alive again. After the others went to sleep, I watch the news and the political TV comedy *heute show*. It doesn't make me laugh today.

### Saturday, 4 April 2020

It is a warm and sunny day. During a walk with a friend, neighbour and colleague at the University of Bayreuth, he tells me about the challenges of virtual teaching and we discuss the petition for a non-semester that we both signed about a week ago and the resistance the petition met from conservative and mostly male professors. Among them, a professor for Marketing and Service Management from our own university has **publicly** announced that the petition was 'shameful' and demanded that teaching staff should take on the 'challenges' posed by the epidemic, rather than engage in 'petty accounting' (kleinkarierte Abrechnungen, in German) in regard to their working hours. He obviously hasn't properly read or understood the petition's demands, namely to respond to the unevenly distributed care responsibilities and restrictions of movement among students and teaching staff. When I return home, Ulaş and Meira are out for a walk and it feels just wonderful to have the flat for



myself. I continue reading Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble*, which I started reading many months ago but never had the time to finish.

After an hour or so, I receive a text message from my cousin saying that her mom, my aunt, has just passed away in the hospital. I talk to my uncle. His son arrived from Hamburg and they were still able to see her in the morning. Due to the morphine she started receiving last night, she was no longer able to fully recognize or respond to them. That is truly sad news. I feel like traveling there, but due to the fact that visiting restrictions are in place and the date for the funeral is not yet set, it doesn't make much sense. I feel with my cousin who due to her COVID-19 infection was unable to see her mother alive one final time. At least, she and her husband are slowly recovering from the infection. After dinner, I tell Meira about her beloved grandaunt's death and we light a candle for her. Having lit candles for her deceased grandfather and my mother's dog in the past few months, Meira wonders out aloud: 'Who's next?'

### **Sunday 5 April 2020**

Under normal circumstances we would have left for Istanbul for four months today. We managed to return our flight tickets (the flights were cancelled), but are still waiting to receive the deposit that we already paid for the flat. Our landlady, who rents out several flats via Airbnb, is desperate, because these days everyone cancels their visits. She says that she will pay us back later. While still in bed, I read an interview in [The New Yorker](#) on the situation in Turkey, which confirms much of what we heard from friends and Ulaş' parents in Turkey. Even though Turkey is now among the top ten of countries with confirmed cases of COVID-19, there still is no lockdown in Istanbul. The situation in the UK is even worse. Many of my friends from Manchester (where I lived for almost two years between 2007–9) have self-quarantined several weeks ago. I worry about Inesh, a friend from Berlin, who lives in

London and works as a medical doctor in a university hospital.

It is a warm and sunny day and I join Meira into the backyard with a book. However, she asks me to leave –she obviously enjoys being on her own during her daily hour or two in the backyard. After lunch, we leave for the Tempelhof Airfield. At the entrance, teams of security personnel distribute flyers. Among other things, these ask visitors to keep a distance of at least 1.50 metres from each other and refrain from sitting together in larger groups or having barbeques. If visitors violate these rules, the flyer says, the airfield might be closed. This is unimaginable today, with tens of thousands of residents flocking to the former airfield with bikes, inline skates, kites, wind skateboards and all kinds of means of transportation. On the way back home, Meira asks for a Shawarma. While helping her to remove her inline skates, Ulaş leaves the bag with her braces on the sidewalk. At night, he returns to look for it, but only finds the empty bag.

I also read out the Passover story to Meira and we listen to some Passover songs on Youtube. Passover Eve is on Wednesday and while we're not too serious about celebrating Jewish holidays in the family, we are planning to have a joint celebration via Zoom.

### **Monday, 6 April 2020**

The pile of student essays to read on my desk is shrinking, a few more to go. I read a field research report from my PhD student in Napoli, who works on tattooing in the city. On March 9, he recounts how people still kiss each other on the cheek as a way of greeting and only after March 10, the first tattoo studios in Napoli closed their doors.

Today, it's even warmer than yesterday and after lunch I take Meira to a nearby garden centre by car to buy plants and potting-compost for our balcony. I'm shocked

to see that the garden centre is packed! I try to leave as quickly as I can, but Meira hasn't been to any shop in a long time and is difficult to get out of there. After planting, we print out flyers in the hope of getting Meira's braces back ("Lost braces! Finder's reward 20 Euro!").<sup>[6]</sup>

While Ulaş and Meira distribute the flyer, I receive a message from Inesh, our friend in London. He writes that 'things are getting worse here. These idiots [he obviously means the conservative government under Boris Johnson] shrug off death as if it was some inevitable natural catastrophe. Three of my patients died from COVID. As did two of our staff. I feel like screaming but I'm too depressed. There's a 70% mortality rate in our intensive care unit, because patients are admitted when it's already too late. I take my hat off to what is happening in Germany.'

After reading the message, I have to sit down. I stare into nothingness for a while. While we sit at home and go for a walk or shopping once in a while, in many hospitals in the world, there is an unimaginable struggle going on. I worry about my friend. I call my uncle and cousin. She and her husband are slowly recovering from the infection, but still unable to leave the house. Her mother, my aunt, will be cremated tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, which allows them to postpone the funeral service until after my cousin is free to leave the house again. Current regulations allow only up to five funeral guests, so given the fact that my aunt's brother will also want to participate, I will not be able to attend the funeral.

## Tuesday 7 April

Home schooling Meira, reading student essays and responding to emails in the morning. In the afternoon, Meira's friend Raya, the one she continues to play with in the backyard, comes to our place and we decide to make a cake. The two girls skim through our cooking books and opt for a strawberry cheesecake. We leave for the small organic food store around the corner to buy the ingredients for the cake. Since

about one week, a sign on the entrance announces that only three customers are admitted to the store at the same time. A large plexiglass pane separates between the customers and the salespersons. On our way back home, I meet my friend G., who teaches at the American University of Cairo. It's been a long time since we last met! We wave at each other from a safe physical distance. She returned to Berlin even though the semester is not yet over. She feels safer in Berlin and reasons that she can do the online teaching from anywhere. The strawberry cake is tricky, but the girls have fun. The cake has to rest in the fridge overnight.

At night, I watch a short BBC documentary of my friend's intensive care unit in London. The doctors and nurses act in a calm and self-composed manner, but they also talk about incredibly long shifts, infected colleagues, of patients dying. Wearing protective clothes for long hours each day must be straining, not to mention the stress and the fear of losing one's patients and colleagues... In the report, there is a scene of an entire team of doctors and nurses turning a sedated corona patient. This scene continues to haunt me and I continue to see it in my mind's eye over and over again.

### **Wednesday 8 April**

The university's public relations department is looking for someone to talk to a public television team about shaking hands. After some deliberations, I agree. The responsible journalist requests to do the filming at home and for a moment I regret having accepted the request. I try to explain that I currently work in a corner of my bedroom, but she assures me that they will choose the angle carefully. I take this as an opportunity to clean the flat. Today is also the day before Passover, which in many Jewish families is a day of intensive spring cleaning, so it makes perfect sense to clean. There's a number of boxes with books and slides and films from my deceased father's house that I try to run through as fast as I can. Most boxes

disappear into the basement. Some stuff from the basement goes into the car to be taken to the municipal waste disposal site one fine day. In the afternoon, we take the strawberry cheesecake that I did with Meira and Raya the day before to be eaten in the backyard. Meira and her friend distribute pieces of cake to the other neighbours in the garden, with small groups sitting in different corners (zealously trying to keep physical distance while doing so); within a few minutes, the cake is gone. It was delicious and the girls are very proud of themselves.

In the afternoon, I go shopping at a larger supermarket to get things for our Passover meal. I hope to find Matzo there, the unleavened bread used for Pessah, but it is sold out. For the first time since the coronavirus outbreak, I take a facial mask with me. Up until now since the lockdown, I completely avoided larger supermarket or the neighbourhood shopping mall, buying things in the smaller and usually empty organic food shop around the corner. Wearing the facial mask feels weird. Sweaty and warm. I cannot imagine working for hours with this thing on. It is difficult to talk and I feel visually impaired. Also, I can feel people staring at me and realise that still only a small minority is wearing face masks.

At night, we celebrate the Seder, the ritual dinner on the first night of Passover, with crisp bread instead of matzo and with a painted Seder plate instead of the ceramic plate that we usually use (it is at my mother's house). The rest of the family present via zoom. We light an additional candle for a family friend, who died aged 73 in Italy the day before. He suffered from a serious kidney damage for several years and has recently refused the dialysis treatment. We wonder whether the threat to be infected with the coronavirus was part of his decision.

## Thursday, 9 April 2020

After home schooling, Meira and Ulaş leave the house and I get ready for the TV

interview.

The TV team arrives with three persons, the interviewer, a camera man and someone for the sound and the light. They wear face masks and are very careful not to touch anything. Welcoming them into the apartment is awkward and I joke that we probably shouldn't shake hands now (they come for a report on (not) shaking hands). It is difficult to keep physical distance in the corridor of our flat. I explain that we could do the interview in front of the bookshelves in our living room or in the bed room, where I usually work. The cameraman prefers the bed room because of the light. It feels rather strange to give an interview for Germany's Channel 1 main news show in my bed room. The journalist borrows a pen from me and before returning it she disinfects it with a liquid that she carries in her handbag. Before leaving, the cameraman gazes into our backyard and sighs that he envies us for it. I tell him that I do realise how lucky we are. He says that he takes his kids to an allotment garden outside of the city over weekends.

I somewhat enjoy the conversation and the time passes quickly. Nevertheless, the interview leaves me somewhat unsatisfied, since nothing of what I said is based on my own empirical findings really. Also, I feel that anyone could have said what I said. At least the event made me clear up the flat!

In the afternoon, I go for walk with my friend Elza, a social worker employed in a social welfare organisation supporting Eastern European minors living on the street in Berlin. Elza continues to work. She is not sure how the epidemic so far has affected the people she serves. Some of them squatted an empty building, others started sleeping outside in order to avoid the shelters (some of which refuse to host any newcomers these days, due to fears of spreading the coronavirus), but also, because the weather increasingly allows them to. Elza makes fun of the mayor's letter to all Berliners, which we also had in our mail box the day before. As if "It is difficult for all of us" and "The streets are empty these days," she says. In contrast, the effects of the lockdown affect different groups of people quite differently in

Berlin, she says, and at least in Kreuzberg and Neukölln where we now walk beside the Landwehrkanal this sunny afternoon, streets are rather crowded. The letter had his picture and a personal address on one side and information on the coronavirus regulations and emergency numbers and addresses of testing stations and help for those affected by domestic violence or quarantine-related anxieties on the other. At night, I suffer from a terrible headache. Is this an effect of the tension caused by the TV interview, or simply a sunstroke?

### Friday, 10 April 2020

Today is Good Friday, a public holiday, but these days every day is as calm and quiet as it is today. Except for the birds in our backyard chirping from about 5 am in the morning, much louder than they ever did before the lockdown, it seems to me. While Meira plays with her friend Raya in the backyard, I write a letter to our institute's board of examination explaining a suspected case of plagiarism. This is not a pleasant thing to do and while I write, I repeatedly check facebook. A British friend of mine posted an article by the Guardian titled "UK will have Europe's worst coronavirus death toll, says study" and commented it the following way: "It was nice knowing y'all. I hope to survive as working very hard to build up a strong immune system through yoga, good music, and diet, but if not... it was fun sharing, liking and showing solidarity in this space!" I know she is being at least partially ironic, but probably also worried, having been in self-quarantine since mid-March in her flat in Manchester. Others scandalize the fact that the effects of the coronavirus are unequally distributed in the US, with poorer families and Black Americans being hit much harder in terms of both health and economics. I also read a [BBC article](#) on the increased use of Eau de Cologne in Turkey due to its disinfecting qualities. This relates so closely to my envisaged research project on smell and scents that in a funding proposal I tentatively called the "Olfactories of Beauty"! Will we be able to leave for Turkey before the winter semester begins? Perhaps I should shift my



research interest and study the use and new connotation of Eau de Cologne in Corona times? In the past few days, as the number of student essays started to dwindle, I began reading into the anthropology of smell and the history of perfumes. I can't remember having come across anything on Eau de Cologne and indeed, this starts to catch my interest.

In the evening, we take a short walk with Anna, who returned to work in the book store on Monday. She tells me that the store is at least as busy as it used to be before the lockdown and that in addition, they also started delivering books. This afternoon, on her way back from the book store she delivered a book to a regular client, who has been in self-quarantine since March 7. Over the phone he told her that he hasn't left the house even once ever since. She dropped the book in his mailbox and was sad to see that the house didn't even have balconies.

At night, the Turkish government announces that there will be a complete lockdown with all stores closed over the weekend. As soon as this piece of news is out, hundreds of thousands take to the street to go shopping. On Twitter, we see pictures of incredibly long queues in front of supermarkets in Istanbul. Someone posts a picture that shows how in front of the supermarket next to the house that we rented in Moda, Istanbul, there is a 1-kilometre long line. On other streets and public squares large groups of people mingle often shouting at and pushing each other.

### **Saturday, 11 April 2020**

Right after breakfast I go grocery shopping, with my facial mask on. Also, I take my bike for repair in a bicycle shop. From a friend who owns a bicycle shop in Kreuzberg I know that bicycle shops are packed these days, because it is spring and many are re-discovering their bikes during the lockdown. However, I'm the first client today and am lucky to be able to pick up the repaired bike on my way back from shopping.



When I enter the market around the corner from our house, the check-out line winds through half of the market. I take the last box of eggs; flour and yeast are out as usual. In the afternoon, Meira discovers an App by the *Show of the Mouse* and I finish reading Donna Haraway's book.

The sudden lockdown in Turkey is on the German news; commentators and political opponents speak of an irresponsible and contra-productive crisis management. Nevertheless, the Turkish president continues to rely on the ongoing support of his many followers. From what we hear via twitter and the **Turkish news**, every citizen aged 65 and above will be given a coronavirus emergency kit including face masks and *kolonya*, Eau de Cologne, which has recently seen a revival due to its disinfectant effect. My Turkish friend in the UK ordered a litre of *kolonya*. According to **Turkish news reports** many people in East and Southeast Asian countries likewise ordered *kolonya* from Turkey. When I conceptualised my research project on the everyday uses of scents and fragrances in Turkey almost one year ago, I could never have imagined its sudden relevance and change of meaning.

### Sunday, 12 April 2020

In the morning, I hide Easter eggs with Vera, our neighbour and mother of Meira's quarantine friend Raya and her little brother. While we sit outside with coffee and a braided yeast bun prepared by their father, the three kids run around looking for eggs and chocolates. Other kids look for Easter eggs in other parts of the garden and we do our best to keep the groups apart.

In the late afternoon, we return to the backyard, which is as crowded as I've rarely seen it before. There are small groups of people with or without blankets in different spots on the lawn and many of them I've never seen before. We brought Meira's tablet because Meira promised Raya and her mother Vera to demonstrate how the

learning app that she uses as part of her homework works. Raya is having difficulties to read and she has so far refused to do her home works or cooperate with Vera's home schooling efforts. Vera has not registered Raya for the app yet. We sit on a blanket in the shade and Meira demonstrates her skills. We open an account for Raya and with Meira's help she finishes several exercises without mistakes. Raya squeaks with joy when the digital learning assistant praises her. I notice that Meira, who easily loses her temper and is rather impatient with us, is a surprisingly patient teacher.

Another neighbour, whose son is also in grade 1, in R's school, watches them and realises that she never knew how to switch to another subject. Accordingly, her son completed all the social science exercises but none in German or Math. I wonder how the other children in Meira's class are doing when even these academic moms have difficulties using the tools provided by their school.

At 7.30 pm on our balcony we sing 'Happy birthday' for our neighbour Jasmin, who is also having dinner on her balcony three floors above us. Neighbours from the other balconies join in, clap hands and pop the corks. It is an incredibly warm evening and many stay on their balconies until well after it gets dark.

The report on the handshake for which I was interviewed has made it into the evening news. I get messages from friends, my uncle and my mother, congratulating me or wondering how I happened to be in a Channel 1 news report? The editor took just one sentence out of a 30-minutes interview. The one in which I say that the hand shake is a habituated bodily technique that was developed thousands of years ago and therefore, it will not simply disappear. What if it does, Ulaş remarks dryly before we switch off the lights.

**Monday 13 April 2020**

At night it rained and the weather has cooled down. We find it difficult to get up and decide that we urgently need a change of scene. We pack our backpacks, get into the car and drive to Lake Stechlin, about one hour north of Berlin, in Brandenburg. On the way, we buy a kilo of asparagus from a street vendor. As usually around this time of the year in Brandenburg, there are many street vendors offering asparagus, potatoes or strawberries, but few cars stop. The streets are surprisingly empty, as is Lake Stechlin. We walk for hours beside the lake's shore; the weather is windy and it feels like walking by the sea.

We rejoice when on the way back we hear on the radio that the National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina recommends a reopening of primary schools in Germany as soon as possible. However, we also realise that this is a rather egoistic desire that feeds on our increasingly tense situation of home schooling. At night, we look into the Leopoldina study and are shocked to see that 24 out of 26 signatories seem to be male. This fact and the neglect of the situation of women, female caretakers of smaller children and especially single mothers is widely remarked upon on twitter, perhaps most prominently by Sabine Hark (Professor of Sociology, TU Berlin). Others post a link to [reports](#) about another study by the Leopoldina in 2016, which recommends the closure of 1,300 hospitals.

## Tuesday 14 April 2020

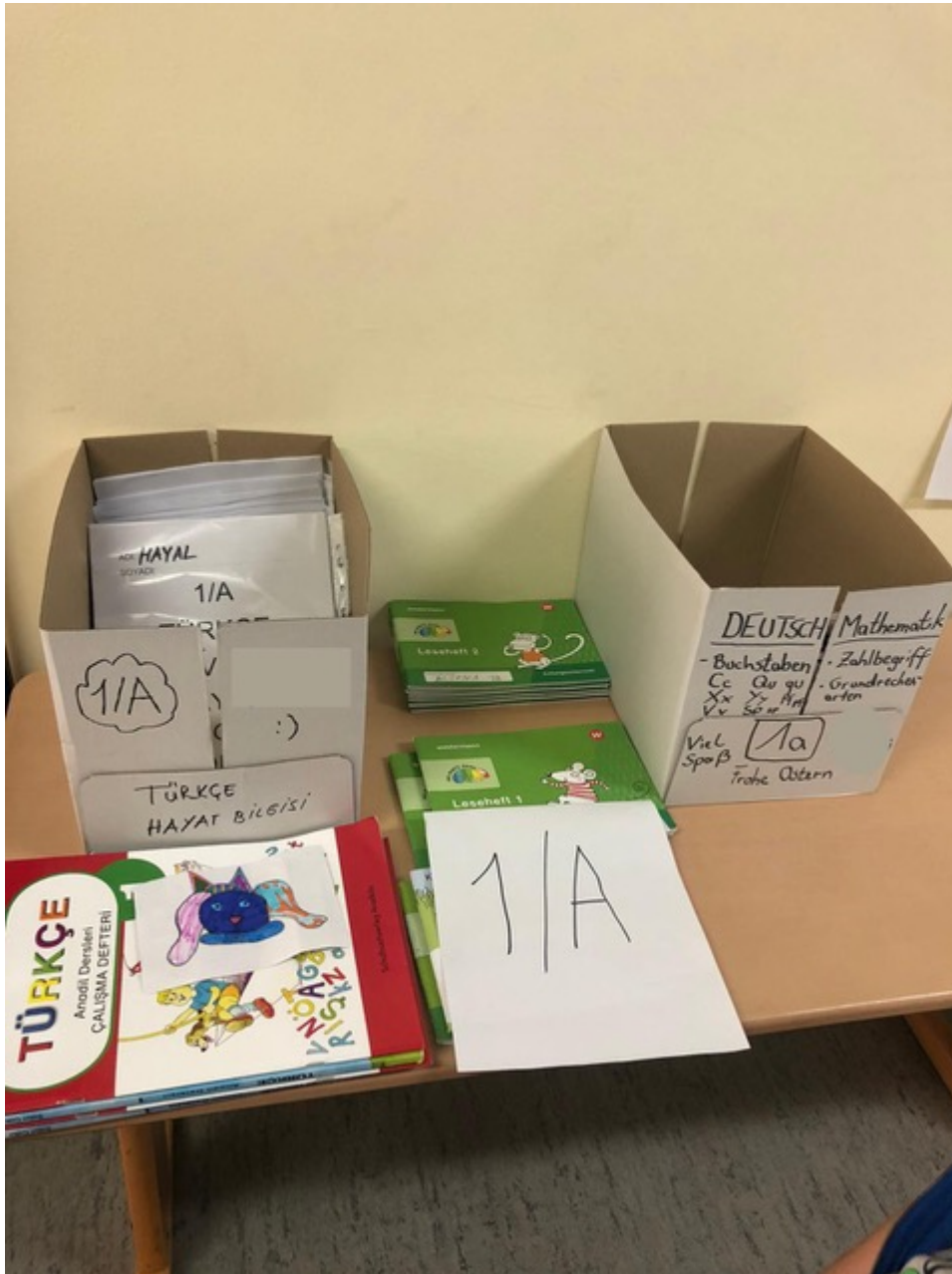
After home schooling Meira in the morning, Meira and me take out our bikes to cycle to her school. The teachers have prepared a new pile of copies for homework, which we intend to pick up. The school is empty except for the janitor. It looks as if we are the first to pick up the learning materials.

While Meira is in the backyard, I write a review on a bachelor thesis which I really enjoyed reading. It is about a protest performance by the Chilean feminist collective

Las Tesis, *Un violador en tu camino*. While watching the performance, which took place in Valparaíso last November, I cannot help but be astonished by the fact how close the performers stand to each other. Such a protest is no longer possible, I realise, at least in the next few weeks and months!

In the evening, a video chat with my colleagues at the University of Bayreuth. We discuss about the future of the hand shake and other bodily techniques like wearing masks (some of them have seen the report on the Sunday evening news). We also discuss the debate on the reopening of schools. None of those present visited their parents over Easter. The PhD candidate from Ruanda, who suffered from a cough two weeks ago, does not participate. Another colleague promises to call him to check whether he is fine.

At night, I receive an email from the conference organisers of the biannual conference of the EASA, the European Association for Social Anthropologists. They announce their decision to have a fully online conference this year, 'with some small in-person events to be held in Lisbon during 2021'. The conference was supposed to take place in Lisbon in mid-July. I was already planning to go visit the pilgrimage site of Fátima after the conference, with my Israeli friend, who is a Professor in the Anthropology of Religion at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. I'm not sure whether the participation in an online conference makes sense for me. My main problem is that I am currently unable to conduct the field research that I was hoping to analyse in the paper I promised to hold. Also, will I be able to give a conceptual paper instead if schools remain closed and I have little time to read or work in a concentrated manner?



Boxes with learning materials ready for pick up in Meira's school (Photo: C. Liebelt).

### Wednesday 15 April 2020

Two weeks after my contract with the Freie Universität ended, I finally finish reading all student essays and Bachelor theses. Without childcare for the past five weeks,

"... there is an unimaginable struggle going on."

<https://boasblogs.org/curarecoronadiaries/there-is-an-unimaginable-struggle-going-on/>

this feels like quite an accomplishment!

A close friend of mine who also teaches at the Freie Universität sends a link to a petition to the university's president that she drafted with her colleagues. Rather than using the "challenge" that the corona crisis offers "creatively" (quoting from an address that the university president gave a few weeks ago), many employees, they note, struggle with a lack of childcare and feel that the situation threatens their future as academics. They demand an extension of contracts and a reduction in teaching loads among other things.

In the afternoon, I take out my sewing machine and sew three face masks with Meira. Hers is from the remnant of the cloth that I used to sew her school cone a few months ago. She proudly wears it upon leaving to play with her friend in the backyard. There, a group of neighbours, all with children at home, discuss about the possible extension of the school closures. We agree that from an epidemiological perspective the opening of school and kindergartens probably makes little sense. Still, we hope that the closures of schools and kindergartens will not continue into the summer. As we talk, two neighbours read out different news live updates that pour in from the meeting between Chancellor Merkel and the Federal Government Heads. Most regulations will stay in place until May 4, some high school classes will return to school, kindergartens and primary schools will remain closed until further notice. Pierre, a high school teacher, sighs that this means he will have to return to work in early May to oversee exams.





*Sewing facial masks in our living room (photo: C. Liebelt).*

At night, a video conference with my sister, mother and her husband. My sister and her husband have been completely isolated for almost a month now, from the moment schools and kindergartens closed. My sister might have to start working again in the following week (first in Cologne and then in Vienna) and is still clueless what to do with her two children while being away (my mom often used to babysit them). My mother's husband is back to work in Cologne. He tells us about revised screenplays and the new hygiene regulations at the film studio. I wonder what the films shot during the next few weeks (and months?) will look like, with all actors

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keeping physical distance from one another.

### Thursday 16 April 2020

In the morning, I am finally able to start thinking about ways to reconceptualise my research project while still unable to do fieldwork in Turkey as originally planned. I research on hand sanitizers and disinfectants in Turkey and elsewhere and start reading into some of the anthropological literature on hygiene and Pasteurization. I discuss this idea further with my friend Caro, with who I meet for a long bike tour from Wannsee towards Griebnitzsee. We take our bikes into the urban railway. I wear my face mask and am relieved to see that the railway is rather empty. It feels great to leave the city and talk to a friend face-to-face. Caro's work contract has finally been signed, which came as a great relief. However, she is now faced with moving from Berlin to Hamburg, which is certainly complicated during Corona times. We talk much about the political moment of the lockdown, the pandemic's connection with global warming and its potential long-term effects, triggered by my reading of Bruno Latour's essay "[What protective measures can you think of so we don't go back to the pre-crisis production model?](#)" earlier this morning.

I also have a long conversation on the phone with my cousin, whose mother, my aunt, will be buried the day after in a small-scale and open-air funeral service. My uncle was granted a last-minute request to increase the number of attendees from 5 to 9, including himself, his two children and their spouses, my aunt's brother, his wife and their two children. My cousin will attend the funeral even though she is still waiting for the final confirmation that she has fully recovered from COVID-19 and is no longer contagious. She argues that she has been free of symptoms for over 15 days. Under normal circumstances we would have attended the funeral and it is sad that we cannot. I decide not to tell Meira about the burial.

After talking to my cousin, I make a new appointment with the decluttering service for the clearing out of my father's house (which is close to where my uncle and cousin live). The new date is in the first week of May, over a month after the original date. I still haven't received replies to my emails from late March to the Bavarian and Saxonian Ministries of Interior asking about transit by private car. However, from today's perspective, my doubts about traveling south in early April appear overanxious.

### Friday 17 April 2020

In the morning, I try to draft an outline of my reconceptualised research project, including virtual ethnography on scented hand sanitizers, the "Olfactories of Hygiene" (a rework of my original working title, the Olfactories of Beauty). I write to colleagues to ask about cooperation partners and whether they can recommend a research assistant.

In the afternoon, I take Meira to the pottery workshop of my friend Einat, who has finally managed to burn the clay figures that I did with the neighbours' kids in the backyard during the first week of the lockdown. Meira is excited to see the workshop and bombards Einat with questions about pottery, the oven and clay. She wears her face mask, but frequently takes it off to make herself better understood. Einat invites her to visit the workshop again in the following week. In the backyard, most of the children, who did clay figures almost a month ago, are present and we distribute the pottery.

Meira stays to play in the backyard and I have a conference call with members of the editorial board of *Sociologus*. At night, I prepare a challah and we light candles for dinner. My cousin and uncle send pictures from my aunt's funeral.

## Saturday 18 April 2020

The weekend newspaper hasn't arrived. The publisher obviously expected problems with the delivery and distributed a code for digital access, which I now use. I return to work while Meira is in the backyard. After lunch, Ulaş' sister, Meira's aunt, takes her to play outside and I have more time to work. She also brought elastic band, difficult to come by these days. This allows me to produce more face masks. In the late afternoon, Meira joins her friend in the backyard even though she is not supposed to (this not being her agreed upon time slot). The weather is warm and sunny and most of the kids are outside. Meira refuses to come in and is angry at me for insisting that she should. At night, one of the neighbours, whose children were also outside, writes to our chat group that another neighbour complained that we obviously decided to ignore all Corona regulations. Indeed, the different groups of kids are increasingly intermingling and we somewhat gave up on telling them again and again to keep physical distance from each other. On the other hand, Jasmin argues that parks and green spaces "outside" are even more crowded these days and that in fact, our backyard is still the safest spot for our kids. We talk to Meira at night and tell her that the neighbouring children might no longer be allowed into the backyard, if groups intermingle and she and her friends do not return home when their parents tell them to. She is unimpressed and I feel uneasy in my role of breaking this piece of news to her.

We are too tired to cook tonight and order food from a nearby pub. We used to eat there once in a while before the lockdown, so it is only fair enough to now use their delivery services to hopefully help them survive economically. However, I regret having ordered food when I see the amount of packaging that remains.

On the evening news we see pictures from the protest against the ban of demonstrations earlier today at the Rosa Luxemburg Square in Berlin-Mitte. They show a weird mix of people and according to a [news article](#) from a Berlin daily, they are. I notice a sign which blames the outbreak of the coronavirus on Bill Gates. I'm

startled, but Ulaş has already come across this conspiracy theory, on Twitter, namely that the new coronavirus stems from a laboratory funded by Gates, as part of some sinister plan to reach for world power... We watch yesterday's *heute show*, a political TV comedy, which already makes fun of a vlogger who advocates exactly this conspiracy theory. The US president's statement, a few days earlier, that the new coronavirus 'escaped' from a lab in China, seems to feed into and fuel these conspiracy theories.

### **Sunday 19 April 2020**

Meira and me have breakfast in bed and I read out to her until it is almost noon. Then, we sew five more face masks to distribute among friends. After lunch, we watch a film on Astrid Lindgren and later go for a walk. The line of our usual ice cream parlour is incredibly long, but we line up nevertheless. While eating our ice cream, we run into our friend Anna who is out for a walk with another friend. Anna hands over a book, which I ordered from the book store where she works. Meira and Anna make an appointment to visit Einat, the ceramicist, in her workshop. I'm quite impressed by the fact that Meira, who hasn't seen Anna in over a month, manages to keep distance.

One of our neighbours forwards a petition to the Federal Ministry of Family Affairs and the Berlin Senate asking for "responsible concepts" for organising childcare for all working parents and a gradual re-opening of kindergartens in May (kindergartens are supposed to stay closed until the end of the summer holidays in August). Since it is written in the name of parents of children in kindergarten, I do not sign. I wonder whether my neighbours do. No one replies to the posting.

### **Monday, 20 April 2020**

Over the weekend, new messages and tasks from Meira's teachers have arrived and

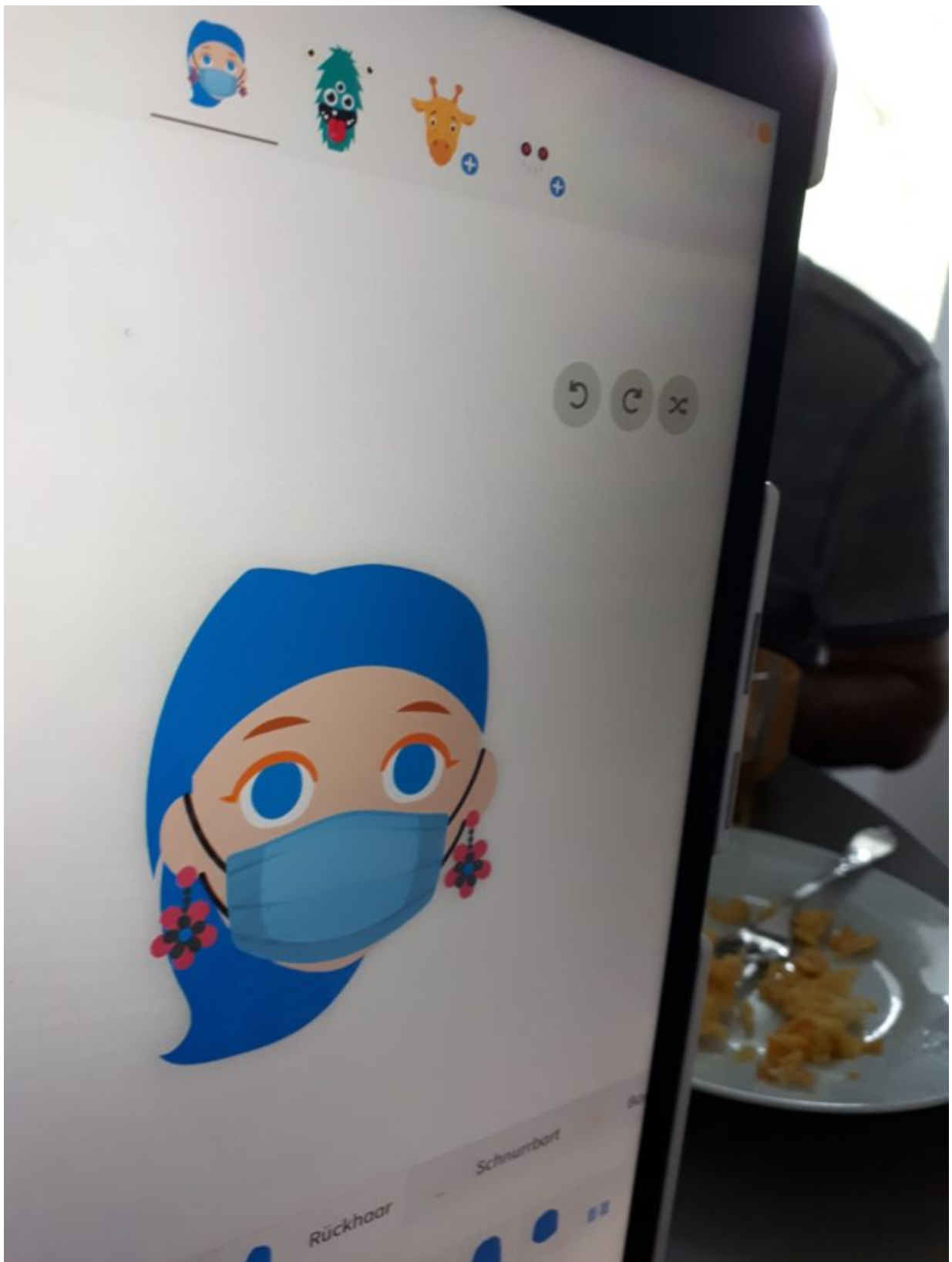
accordingly, we have a family team meeting to reschedule Meira's weekly class schedule. More German and Math classes and no more English classes in preparation of our stay in Istanbul. In any case, it doesn't look like we're leaving for Istanbul any time soon. This is also the day the semester begins and Ulaş and I divide the work days between us. I get Mondays and Wednesdays, he gets Tuesdays and Thursdays to work. We will share the Fridays. At 9 o'clock I cycle to work at my office in Mehringhof. My office is in a room that I share with my friend Caro and another person in the corner of a large loft rented by a number of political initiatives, NGOs, independent publishers and researchers.

The large floor is almost empty. As is the entire Mehringhof, which is usually packed with people hanging out in the courtyard or the beer garden of the pub Clash, shopping at the book store Schwarze Risse or the bicycle shop next door. The book store and the bicycle shop have large signs on their doors asking their clients to act responsibly. The bicycle shop also asks its clients to leave children outside. The book store sells its books from the window. I remember a conversation with the bookseller, a neighbour, during the second week of the lockdown. He had complained that due to the Clash being closed, those who usually hang out there now come to the book store to chat with him. The window sale is obviously a response to this.

This feels like the first day of concentrated work in ages! During my lunch break, I pick up copies from Meira's school, which is around the corner from the office. I run into Meira's teacher. She is worried about the first-grade pupils forgetting everything they have learnt up until the lockdown and has started inviting the parents of those pupils she most worries about to school.

## Tuesday 21 April 2020

U. has left to his office at the University of Potsdam and I'm at home alone with Meira. Her friend Raya, with whom she normally plays in the backyard, is away for an excursion to their new holiday home. Meira is bored. I join her into the backyard and try to get some reading done. In the afternoon, Meira spends much time with her learning app, doing exercises but also dressing up her avatar (it now wears a face mask), and I get to work a bit.



“... there is an unimaginable struggle going on.”  
<https://boasblogs.org/curarecoronadiaries/there-is-an-unimaginable-struggle-going-on/>



*Meira's avatar on her learning platform now wears a facial mask (Photo: C. Liebelt).*

At night, a video conference with colleagues. They just had their online semester opening, with some difficulties apparently. How lucky I am not to be forced to teach this semester! The PhD candidate from Ruanda is with us again, and his cold is gone. He never received the result of his test. We relate how at one point many of us felt they had caught the virus...

### **Wednesday 22 April 2020**

Today, I'm at my office in Mehringhof again and like two days ago, there are just two other persons on the entire floor. To follow up on my participation in the first round, I complete the second part of the survey on the **Corona Quotidian** by the Berlin Social Science Center (WZB). I also skim through the results of the first part, on employment during the Corona crisis. The results are hardly surprising, with parents and those responsible for childcare, women especially, working less and being forced to increasingly work at night. I've been pondering about developing my own survey on the "Cultures of Hygiene" in Germany and Turkey, and especially on the role of smell (with *Eau de Cologne* being widely used as a hand disinfectant in Turkey these days) for some days and am increasingly unsure about this. Doing surveys takes a lot of time in preparation and analysis and it is so far removed from the ethnographic field research that I would really like to do. On the other hand, having been trained in quantitative Sociology while studying at the University of Cologne, I've used surveys before, mainly for getting in touch with people, who I then met for more substantial conversations and ethnographic interviewing. At the end of the day, I come up with a first draft for a survey on hygienic practices, smell and the role of hand sanitizers.

During the afternoon, a number of messages from my deceased father's friends and

neighbours reach me. Today would have been his 80th birthday; the first birthday after he passed away last August. With all these messages coming in, it is increasingly difficult to concentrate on work. I cycle home and start composing a power point file with photos from different stages of his life, complete with captions and longer stories in between. At 9 pm, after a brief walk with Anna, I finally finish, convert the power point file into a pdf document and send it off via email, to about twenty of his closest friends, as well as my uncle and cousins.

### Thursday 23 April 2020

In the morning, I have touching emails in my inbox from quite a number of my father's friends. They thank me for the storybook on my father's life and tell me about their current situation. Most of them are in their seventies and eighties, in self-quarantine at home, though they often own their own houses with large gardens. Friends from his former bible study group write that they feel protected from the virus, because they take 6 g of vitamin C per day. Others tell me about video conferences with their grandchildren. Some worry about their children, who continue to work, also pitying 'the younger generations' to be forced to restrict their lives 'because of us'. They tell me about long walks in nearby forests and hills. In contrast, Ulaş' parents in Turkey, like everyone aged 65 and above, are not supposed to leave the house except for shopping. They sneak out shortly after dawn for morning walks in the hills behind their house, sending us pictures via WhatsApp every other day.

U. works in his office in a deserted university building in Potsdam today and I'm at home with Meira. In the afternoon, we leave for the Tempelhof Airfield with Meira wearing her inline skates. There, we accidentally run into a very close friend of Meira's, L., also on her skates, and her father, my friend. Again, I'm impressed by the fact that they do not run up to each other and hug, but keep a proper distance,

skating next to each other down the airfield. While we have an ice cream, I receive a message from Ulaş about a change of regulations by the Berlin Senate: from Monday onwards, the children of university employees involved in online teaching are eligible for emergency childcare. L.'s father says they too are eligible, but prefer to keep L. at home to minimise the risk of infection.

### Friday, 24 April 2020

In the morning, I work for a few hours and Ulaş does the home schooling. During lunch, we discuss the matter of the emergency childcare. It's a difficult decision. We've somewhat managed so far, but now that the semester has begun, keeping Meira at home is increasingly challenging. I write a request for emergency childcare to the school directory and receive a positive reply within an hour. The director says that they have just a couple of kids and have succeeded in keeping the groups small and constant. Meira will not have to wear a mask, but they will talk to them about hygiene and make sure that they wash their hands correctly. This sounds comforting and we think about trying it out on Monday. We will have to talk this over with the parents of Meira's regular backyard playmates, or even better still with all the parents of the kids who regularly use the backyard...

In the afternoon, I take Meira to deliver a face mask to Ella, the mother of my friend Inesh, who works in a hospital in London. Ella lives in a garden settlement on the other side of our district and the trip there, by bicycles alongside the canal, is quite an excursion. We sit in Ella's beautiful garden and sip tea with cardamom. She worries about her son, who works in an intensive care unit. She misses her grandson whom she will not be able to visit for his birthday in August, as she usually does. In exchange for the face mask, Ella presents us with a large bunch of mint. At night after dinner, we have fresh mint tea with our challah.

### Saturday, 25 April 2020

I continue reading Latour's *Pasteurization of France*, which I started a few days ago. Some of the debates from the late 19th century that he describes are incredibly resonant of the current situation. In the afternoon, I clear out the basement a bit and take a bag of cast-off clothes to a charity collection bin. On facebook, many friends post warnings about the easing measures by health experts and epidemiologists. At night I sent out a message to our neighbours (those, whose kids regularly use the backyard), telling them that from Monday, we are eligible for emergency childcare and that we wonder what we should do. Almost all of the families write back that if we choose to do so, it would be difficult to continue using the backyard the way we do. Also, the mother of Meira's regular friend is weary, which is quite understandable given the fact that Meira and Raya have become very close in the past few weeks and do not keep physical distance. I realise that we would threaten our idyllic backyard situation by sending Meira to school on Monday. It would certainly be difficult to explain to her why she can no longer play outside with her friends in the evenings and on the weekends.

### Sunday, 26 April 2020

After breakfast, I take out my sewing machine again and produce another set of eight more face masks.

In the afternoon, we meet friends from Israel with their 9-year old son at the Tempelhof Airfield. We keep a distance from each other, cycling, flying kites. At night, a walk with my neighbour and colleague at the University of Bayreuth. He tells me about a text he wrote with another colleague on the pandemic from a Foucauldian perspective, as well as on the situation in Brazil (where he has done

extensive research in the past few years). With Brazil's President Bolsonaro ignoring most health advises and even raising crowds against those governors who have ordered shutdowns, the situation there is worrisome indeed.

### Monday, 27 April 2020

I return to my office at Mehringhof. Today, I'm alone in my room as well as the only person on the floor, a 500+ qm loft. I read the compiled google docs list on "[Doing fieldwork in a Pandemic](#)" available on the website of the [COVID-19 resources](#) website of the American Anthropological Association. I work on a website for my project, as well as on questions for an online survey. In the evening, I try to make Meira participate in the online Capoeira training with her usual group. She dresses up in her usual training gear but then is too shy to actually participate.

### Tuesday, 28 April 2020

A hot and sunny day; while home schooling Meira, Ulaş has a committee meeting in our bedroom. Meira sneaks in twice. In the backyard, I talk to Vera, the mother of Meira's friend and a photographer and ask her to take pictures for my new project website. I talk to her and another neighbour, Emilia, about the ongoing openings of which they are both rather critical. Although they suffer from the closure of schools and kindergarten and are hardly able to work (Vera is an independent artist and a mother of two children aged 3 and 6, Emilia is a PhD candidate and mother of a daughter aged 8), they hope schools and kindergartens will not reopen too early. The kindergarten on the corner of our building that before the lockdown has been using our backyard between 2-4 pm is back with a small group of kids between 2-3 pm. This doesn't affect us much, since we kept our kids out of the backyard between 12-3 pm anyway. Our neighbour Pierre, whose son is part of the backyard children's gang,

is back to work in his school, preparing pupils for their A-levels.

At night, I participate in the first session of our departmental seminar via zoom. A colleague of mine shares a **report** that quotes academic publishers who claim that whereas submissions by male academics increased, female academics have hardly submitted anything due to the unequal distribution of childcare. This is shocking, though hardly surprising.

### **Wednesday, 29 April 2020**

This is my day of work again, and again, I'm all by myself on the floor of our office in Mehringhof. The construction work in the yard is so loud that I'm hardly able to concentrate. At around 3 pm I pack my things and leave for Einat's workshop to pick up Meira. Einat agreed to Meira visiting her and did some pottery with her. Meira's produced a blowfish and a figurine sitting on a shelf. They are both wearing face masks, Einat the one we made for her. Einat has not been able to sell much lately. All artisans' markets in the city are closed, though there is one vegetable market where she is still able to sell.

On the way home, we discover an ice cream place without a long line in front of it and get some ice cream. There's a package in the post for Meira from my sister, with presents for Easter. It took six days to arrive, which is quite a lot within the same city.

At night, a team meeting with my two PhD students, currently residing in Naples and Zurich respectively. The internet connection on my side is fragile and I wonder whether we should upgrade our internet package. Perhaps this is also due to the fact that Switzerland and Italy are much better prepared for the digital age.

## Thursday, 30 April 2020

Today we are supposed to hand in Meira's homework and pick up a new set of copies. At all the other schools that I've heard of, parents are requested to download and print worksheets and then upload the completed ones. However, at Meira's school, teachers are afraid that this might exclude students. They're probably right. Meira is reluctant to enter the school building, but once she sees her teacher, she is overwhelmed with joy. Jumping up and down with excitement, she gives a brief summary of all the nice things she did in the past month and a half. From what she tells her, the lockdown sounds like fun. One of her classmates comes in with his mother and sister. In contrast to Meira, he stays close to his mother and is too shy to talk. The mother recounts how her daughter (who is in grade 3 or 4, I assume) has been losing her hair due to the stress caused by the lockdown.

After submitting all the homework, I promised Meira that we enter her favourite toy store, which has reopened this week, to buy a gift from the money my uncle sent for Easter. She chooses a large hand puppet, a black cross-eyed wolf-like creature. It is gorgeous. We call it Vielfraß, the Wolverine.

There's another zoom meeting of her Capoeira group and this time, we invite her friend Raya over to our place so that they can do the training together. This works much better and I even manage to read a theory text while they do so. In my Inbox, another email from the university's president, with yet another set of regulations. The university will remain closed for teaching sessions during the rest of the semester. For everything else, one has to apply for permission and observe strict rules for hygiene. The email implies that they do not yet have sufficient hand sanitizer, which prompts me to write an email asking for more information.





Meira and her quarantine friend Raya practising Capoeira via Zoom (Photo: C. Liebelt).

### Friday, 1 May 2020

Labour Day in Berlin without the usual demonstrations, concerts, street food and parties... Never mind Easter –a shutdown on May 1 is really tough! Meira and I watch different youtube versions of workers' songs, among them my favourite, "Bread and Roses". Still in bed, we record our own version, with me playing the acoustic guitar and both of us singing. In the early afternoon, I meet Caro on our usual bridge by the canal and we walk towards Mariannenplatz in Kreuzberg, where on May 1 tens of thousands of people usually take to the streets to attend the Myfest. We discuss the

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idea of immunity passes for those, who have recovered from COVID-19, which is in the news these days and was also commented upon by Christian Drosten in his podcast the day before. Caro is appalled by the idea.

Even when Kreuzberg today is a far cry from a “normal” May 1, it feels as crowded as never before in 2020. The park next to Mariannenplatz is filled with groups of people drinking beer or having picnics; playgrounds have re-opened the day before and are full; by the canal, I see several groups of youngsters who share bottles of champagne; around Heinrichplatz, dozens of cop cars are ready to interfere with anything that might still be happening today. While the traditional 1 pm demo has been cancelled, autonomous groups have called for a revolutionary first of May demo at 6 pm, demanding freedom of assembly, an increase of welfare payments and full wage compensation in the case of reduced working hours. While I’m not sure whether any of our friends will join this demo some are protesting in front of the Kreuzberg Urban hospital, in support of the hospital staff.



"... there is an unimaginable struggle going on."

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Posters announcing the revolutionary 1st of May demonstration in Berlin-Kreuzberg (photo: C. Liebelt).

In the evening, we watch the *Show with the Mouse*, a re-run from the 1990s. Armin, the moderator tells his ten years old daughter about life after the war: what they ate (not much), what they wore, how they lived (in one room with his mother and sister in a farmer's house). The show takes on a new meaning in times of a lockdown. Meira is visibly impressed and keeps on asking us questions.

We're shocked to hear that shortly before 8 pm, a film team of the Channel 2 *heute show*, including the comedian and reporter Abdelkarim Zemhoute, has been attacked by a group of protesters. We wonder whether these were Neonazi protesters with racist motives? The fact that these kinds of protests are gaining momentum is deeply disturbing.

### **Saturday, 2 May 2020**

Several times today, it is pouring rain. In the afternoon, Meira and her friend Raya play at home. We make waffles and the two dress up. At night, they watch *The Last Unicorn* with Raya's family and, for the first time since February, Ulaş and me go to visit my mother. She looks fine and we laugh a lot. We sit on the terrace at a distance from each other, drinking a glass of champagne and putting on our facial masks when inside the flat. We take the puppet theatre that has been standing on her terrace with us.

### **Sunday, 3 May 2020**

I sew curtains for the puppet theatre and take it to the backyard. Raya and Meira paint the scenery and perform a little show. They can't agree on a storyline or on

who plays which puppet; it's all very chaotic and soon their audience, about five other kids, loses interest and starts playing soccer. In the afternoon, Meira and I leave for Prenzlauer Berg to deliver a birthday present for my sister's younger daughter, who turns four tomorrow. This is the first time we meet since almost two months. We meet in front of the house and go for a walk to an ice cream parlour to get some ice cream. The three kids try to stay at a distance from each other. We avoid the playground, which is rather full and go to a nearby park. My sister tells me that she hasn't had time away from the kids since the beginning of the lockdown. While her husband, a filmmaker, has disappeared into his private office once in a while, except for shopping she stayed at home *all the time*. Upon return, Meira vanishes into the backyard and I pack a bag for my trip south to finally clear out my father's house. I print out the email from the decluttering service, just in case I happen to be stopped by police. I also take the documents that prove my ownership of the house.



*Vielfraß, the Wolverine, in a play yet to be written (Photo: C. Liebelt).*

### **Monday, 4 May 2020**

I get up early, get into the car and drive south. The motorway is rather empty, though there is quite a number of international lorries, especially on the Route #6 coming from the Czech Republic. The toilets in both motorway restaurants that I visit along the route are for free. Both display posters and flyers by the Ministry of Health with information on COVID 19. In both places, I'm the only customer. In the early evening, I meet my uncle and cousins at the graveyard. It is difficult to not even be able to hug them. It's also difficult to find the right words. So much has happened

since we last met in February. I've brought flowers to put down beside the grave. From the graveyard, we drive to my uncle's place, four persons in three different cars. We sit on the terrace, but later move inside because it is getting too cold outside. I offer to leave or at least wear my mask to not put my uncle at risk but he insists that it is okay. We order a pizza and sit at the four ends of their large dining room table to eat. It is a rather surreal scenery. My cousin talks about her COVID-19 quarantine with her three kids. During the entire time, she never saw a doctor, but, after the testing, was called by employees from the local health office (a medical student engaged to help out, as he told her). Due to the fact that my cousin recovered quickly and wanted to see her father as soon as possible and also take part in the funeral (her mother died while she was sick in bed without her being able to see her one last time), the question arose how long she would have to stay at home in quarantine? Her husband's quarantine officially began the moment he handed in the list of persons he had recently been in touch with, but my cousin (trained in law) argues that it should have begun the moment he was tested positive. When she called the municipal office that had ordered the quarantine (by letter), they referred her back to the health office. The health office, in turn, said they were only responsible for the testing and the subsequent checks (via telephone), not the official lifting of the quarantine. In the end, she took part in the funeral anyway.

## Tuesday, 5 May 2020

At 8 am, a team of seven men arrives from the decluttering service. I'm surprised, because I was told that due to the regulations they could work in teams of up to three persons only. They are all men in their fifties or sixties. Some wear masks upon arrival, but all of them take them off while working. I do wear my mask when talking to them inside the house, but feel increasingly ridiculous doing so. While they are busy inside, I work in the garden. As I pull up weeds, neighbours come over for a chat. They are worried about their own health and their children's economic



situation. They miss their grandchildren. But apart from that, their everyday life sounds hardly disrupted. Most of them are pensioners and they all have their own houses with large gardens. One of them tells me how she had her bike repaired and goes cycling. Another neighbour, Mr. K. – a guy in his sixties with long hair and a light blue sports coat, who made his riches with gambling and over the years has turned his front garden into a sculpture exhibition of life-size animals, including a brown bear, a giraffe and a wild boar– offers me a semi-detached house in Berlin in exchange for my father's house. While I know almost every single household and family in this neighbourhood, this is the first time I actually talk to Mr. K. He obviously is the pariah of the neighbourhood. We talk about real estate prices in Berlin and Stuttgart and the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. I take his business card but am not particularly interested in his offer.

During one of the workers' cigarette breaks on the terrace, I prepare coffee and we have a chat. They haven't had many orders to fill during the past few weeks. People have had enough time to clear out their houses and do away with their stuff by themselves, one of them offers by way of an explanation. They're optimistic about finishing the house by the end of the day instead of taking another one to two days, as originally scheduled. And indeed, by 4 o'clock they're all done and except for the furniture in the living room and the bed that I sleep in on the top floor, which will stay, the house is now empty. I spent the rest of the day cleaning, listening to news on the radio while doing so.

### **Wednesday, 6 May 2020**

While driving south, I listened to a radio feature on recycling centres being overcrowded these days, because so many people started clearing out their garages, basements and houses. The local household waste recycling centre in the small town right next to my father's village opens at 7 am, so in order to avoid long lines I get up

early and drive up to the gate shortly after 7 am. There, they tell me that due to the hustle and bustle during the first weeks of the shutdown, two weeks ago they stopped accepting the garbage by anyone not actually living in the town itself. They advice that I drive up to another recycling centre about 20 km away. However, there they might not accept my garbage, because the different villages of the district are assigned particular days. After some deliberations, they send me to the commercial rubbish dump next door.

I get in line between huge trucks and at the gate am being weighed, sitting in my car. From there, I drive to a huge hall, and throw the few things that I have onto a huge pile of garbage. I've never seen anything like this before and take a few pictures until the truck driver in line behind me insists that it's time to leave by honking his horn. On my way out, I get off and take the stairs to see the man in the tower (his window is built to communicate with truck drivers). He asks me to get back on the scale in order to determinate the weight of the garbage I dropped. After a few jokes on the masses of garbage that I dropped and my body weight, he sends me off laughingly without me having to pay. Driving back to my father's house, I smile to myself and have the impression that this man hasn't laughed in a long time. So have I.



Finally, a place to unload rubbish (Photo: C. Liebelt).

Back in the house, I continue cleaning and tending to the garden. In the afternoon, my former best friend Simone from long-gone school days arrives and we sit on two carpets facing each other on the lawn in front of the house, drinks between us. Simone is a manager in the headquarters of the car manufacturer Daimler-Chrysler and suffers from reduced pay and significantly reduced working hours these days. She also suffers from the tediousness of not working and has not been able to read as much as she would have liked to. Her husband continues to work and it doesn't feel good to just sit at home most days and worry about the future, she says. This is the day after the so-called 'Car Summit,' a meeting between representatives of the automobile industry and the government. Simone is also a union activist. She thinks

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the large car companies should do anything they can to save jobs, including not paying out dividends to shareholders. In the past few weeks, I secretly hoped that the car industry will, if not collapse, then at least be forced to restructure to produce more sustainable vehicles. For me, the lack of traffic congestion and of cars in the streets of Berlin during the second half of March was one of the most pleasurable side effects of the lockdown. However, this is not something one can easily talk about in this region, where the majority of jobs is tied to the car industry in one way or the other.

After Simone leaves, I drive up to another dump, for garden waste and wait in line for almost half an hour. The dumping ground opens twice a week and it's obviously very busy these days.

In the evening, a team of four colleagues from the ham radio operator club of my dad arrives to take down his antenna. The antenna is over three metres long and this is quite an operation. Luckily, they arrive equipped with an aerial ladder and tools (rather fittingly, one of them is a firefighter). They are men in their fifties to seventies, but except for me and Paul, my father's close friend whom I've known since I was a child, no one wears a facial mask. After they're done, I serve them coffee and snacks and standing around the living room table at an appropriate distance from each other, a conversation on the Corona regulations evolves. One of them, the club's chairman, is particularly critical of the government's handling of the lockdown, claiming that COVID-19 is just a normal flu and that so far only the elderly, those who would have died anyway, have died. This reminds me of the outrageous remarks by Boris Palmer, the mayor of nearby Tübingen, during a TV talk show a few days ago. I find his remark outrageous and protest, but try to keep calm given the fact that they just helped me and are my guests. I try to switch into the mode of the ethnographer, listening and learning rather than commenting. The others have obviously come across such lines of reasoning before or they even agree. The chairman owns an electronics company and had to send his employees into short-

time working. They've produced face masks for a while, but hope to soon return to their normal working routines. Another one misses his regular swims in the public pool every morning. The fourth is a representative of a communal council and offers that all public pools will remain closed throughout the summer.

At night, there is an online plenary of the Mehringhof collective, with one representative per floor/initiative participating. Our representative reports back to us via email that due to the fact that in the past weeks, Mehringhof has been broken in four times already, the plenary decided to organise nightshifts between 10 pm and 6 am. We have to put down our names into a list of volunteers or engage a private security firm for 250 EUR per night. Honestly, I do not see myself doing night shifts in Mehringhof. We urgently need a meeting with the others from our floor, but most have not even participated in the doodle sent around a few days ago.

### **Thursday 7 May 2020**

Early in the morning, I pack the car and mop the floors. My cousin's husband, a real estate agent arrives. I hand over the keys to him and we take a final tour through the building. He has recently recovered from COVID-19, but we still keep physical distance. He is not sure yet in what ways the pandemic will affect the real estate market in the region. Before he leaves, we joke about doing business deals without shaking hands.

I say good bye to the neighbours on both sides and shortly before noon, take off to Berlin. There is much more traffic today than there was on Monday on the way south. On the radio, the main news is the opening up of the lockdown regulations. There's an interesting feature on the so-called Democratic Resistance group that organises weekly protests in front of the Berlin theatre Volksbühne, which makes it clear that their ideology is based on a rather weird conspiracy theory. The Robert



Koch Institute announces that it will no longer hold its regular press conferences. I wonder whether this is a smart decision with different kinds of conspiracy theories increasingly invading the public discourse.

In the early afternoon, I leave the motorway to have something for lunch, but the only thing I can find is a McDonald's drive in. The restaurant that the long-distance bus on the way to and from Bayreuth used to stop at still sells take-away drinks, but no food. The person at the counter says that since the lockdown, they have hardly had any customers and reopened just a few days ago, so preparing food is not yet worth the effort.

I haven't been to a McDonald's since doing fieldwork in Israel (there, my Filipino interlocutors used to take me), and I've never been to a drive-in restaurant. Through an intercom, I order a vegetarian burger and ask what's in it. The person on the other side of the line isn't sure, saying "it's something vegetarian, or was it vegan?" I pay by card and as I move on to the next counter, someone already holds out the package containing my burger. While eating it, standing next to my car, lacking appetite really, I read my WhatsApp and text messages, including a message from the parents' representative telling us that Meira's class will be back to school from next Friday. I forward this piece of information to our Corona-commune (that is, our neighbours who use the backyard with their kids). They spontaneously agree to meet in the backyard to discuss the new situation. The discussion is already over when I arrive, but will continue on Sunday afternoon. I cannot help but feel relieved about the reopening of Meira's school. Home-schooling has been increasingly difficult in the past few days and weeks.

Within an hour of the announcement of the reopening of Berlin's primary schools, I receive emails from the University of Bayreuth, announcing the partial reopening of the main library and the cafeteria. Suddenly, everything seems to return back to 'normal' rather speedily. Wondering what this does with my mom, I call her and indeed, she says that she now feels at risk even more than she used to in March and

April.

### Friday 8 May 2020

Today is a public holiday in Berlin, marking the 75th anniversary of the liberation from fascism and war. Instead of commemoration events and demonstrations against the re-emergence of fascist groups in Germany and elsewhere, large so-called “Hygiene Demonstrations” take place, the largest being in Stuttgart. Bewildered from watching pictures of the demo, a crazy mixture of anti-vaxxers, conspiracy theorists with signs about Bill Gates as the head of a secret conspiracy, –many of them looking like normal burghers rather than right-wing activists, I have to think of the ham radio club members that I met only two days earlier. Are they among the crowd?

In another kind of event on Hermannplatz, our neighbourhood square, Ulaş gives a speech in the name of the activist alliance “[Unraveling the NSU Complex](#),” as part of the Day of Rage called up by the Migrantifa (short for migrant antifascist resistance) to protest racist, right-wing and anti-semitic violence. I am still exhausted from the trip to southern Germany and read Rosie Braidotti’s *The Posthuman*.

### Saturday 9 May 2020

In the afternoon, our Corona commune neighbours meet in the backyard to again discuss the upcoming measures of opening, including the opening of schools. When some of our children are obliged to return to school, can we let them continue to play together in the backyard? There’s much uncertainty among the group. One neighbour from Italy is highly critical of the hygienic concepts of schools in Berlin, at least those that have been made public so far and suggests that one should more



radically rethink schooling these days. She will try to keep her daughter at home. Some parents welcome the opening of schools and kindergartens, though some of their children are not too eager to return to these institutions. Should we establish our own system of backyard schooling for our kids? While I love the pervasive spirit of communalism and solidarity that underlies these suggestions, I really dread the vision of spending the rest of the summer as a part-time teacher of fifteen children of different ages in the backyard. After discussing into all kinds of directions for an hour or so, I attempt to direct the debate into a more pragmatic direction: who continues to feel at risk and how can we protect them, given that eventually, many of us will start sending their children to school or kindergarten again? There are two households with persons at risk in them who say they would rather leave their children at home. After more than two hours of discussion, we begin to freeze. We decide to postpone the discussion and wait and see how the school openings are actually being handled.

### **Monday 10 May–Friday 15, 2020**

My new research project on the “Olfactories of Hygiene” is moving forward and I am happy to recruit a talented student of mine as a research assistant. This week, my new project website goes online and I manage to set up and publish my first blog posts for a research blog titled **Cultures of Hygiene**.

On Tuesday night, we finally receive more information about the opening of schools, that is, a concrete schedule. A few hours of schooling are spread somewhat erratically over the next few weeks. Given the fact that we started getting up later than we did before the lockdown (at about 7.30 am rather than at about 6.30 am), we are glad to see that Meira’s school will start at 8.30 am only. There will be six other children in Meira’s group and she is happy to see that her best friend is among them.

On Friday, May 15, Meira returns to school after almost two months at home. She is excited and as we take her by bike in the morning, it feels like a second first day at school. However, we quickly realise this is not school as usual. The seven children of Meira's group meet their teacher in front of the building, line up holding a rope with knots every 1.5 metres to help them keep distance from each other and then march off to the washroom to wash their hands before entering their classroom. At noon, Meira returns somewhat tense and in a bad mood. She snatches my tablet and disappears into her room, locking the door behind her.



*Meira upon entering her school in May (Photo: C. Liebelt).*

### Sunday 16 May 2020

A bike tour with friends that starts at a newly discovered bakery, hidden away in a backyard in our neighbourhood. This is another positive effect of the long walking tours that we did during the lockdown in our neighbourhood: we discovered all kinds of new places, including this one, complete with sofas in an idyllic backyard.

In the early evening, I conduct a first interview for my new research project.

### Monday 17 May 2020

Today is my first visit to the Freie Universität in Berlin-Dahlem since the lockdown. I go there to return and borrow books from the central university library. There is a guard at the library entrance making sure that everyone wears a mask. We chat and he tells me that only a few students have so far turned up. The library re-opened a few days ago and it looks like I'm the only customer at the moment. It is weird and somewhat sad to see the campus so empty.

My usual bakery, in contrast, is packed with Dahlem residents enjoying their cakes and coffees outside in the sun. On my way back to Neukölln, I pay a visit to my friend Anna's book shop and buy books for my mom and for Meira. They allow up to six clients into the store at the same time. Apart from the fact that most clients wear masks, things look rather normal there.



Following the arrows in the Berlin's Free University's Central Library (Photo: C. Liebelt).

### Wednesday 19 May 2020

I take Meira to school and work from home. In the afternoon, I walk into a local Arab perfumery to buy and chat about hand sanitizers (as part of my research) and discover the smell of Oud. Also, I start reading a book on the history of musk in the Islamic World with the ornate title –in the style of medieval Arab scholarly books– *Scent from the Garden of Paradise*. What a wonderful thing to learn and reflect about, scents and fragrances. At night, I publish a blog post on buying hand sanitizer at my local pharmacy. I've been taking notes for a blog post on smellscape during the lockdown and look forward to writing about this in the following week perhaps.

## Friday 20 May 2020

I vanish into the office for a few hours in the morning and meet Ulaş and Meira for lunch next to the canal. In the afternoon, I go for a long walk with Meira. Just as I felt that debates within my social media circles shifted to themes other than Covid-19 –the incredible debate on Achille Mbembe’s alleged anti-semitism, for example– friends post disturbing images from the so-called Hygiene demos all across Germany. These include pictures of a poster showing Christian Drosten next to the Nazi physician Joseph Mengele and of protesters wearing yellow badges with the inscription ‘unvaccinated’. I feel physically sick when I first see these. Also, there is an increasing presence of Anti-(Bill) Gates stickers in public space, especially on private cars in Berlin. While the Corona lockdowns are slowly coming to an end in Western Europe, it is obvious that the pandemic is far from over. We will still have to deal with the other-than-medical long-term consequences of the pandemic.





Anti-Gates sticker on the back of a car in Berlin in early May (Photo: C. Liebelt).

## Postscriptum

On May 29, Meira started to attend the 'emergency care' centre at her school on a regular basis, which allowed us to return to our more or less regular working routines. While most of our neighbours started sending their children to school in late May and June, others continued to keep them at home until the beginning of the summer holidays. Most have cancelled their summer holidays or, like us, are planning to camp somewhere nearby.

Retrospectively, this has been a creative and productive time, though certainly challenging. We certainly discovered the value of neighbourliness, *komşuluk* in Turkish: Our kids now form a tightly knit group of friends of different ages; they can stay in the backyard for hours a day without adults in all kinds of weather, gardening, building things, inventing games, writing their own newspapers or reading out books to each other. Meira has come out of this experience as even more independent and strong-willed than she used to be. In late July, we are still unable to leave for research in Turkey due to the fact that the travel warnings and restrictions are still in place and the COVID-19 situation is rather volatile. Instead, I do my best to rethink classical ethnographic fieldwork, taking up different forms of virtual and auto-ethnography; throughout June, I conducted a large online survey on “Cultures of Hygiene in Turkey and Germany” and began engaging in “anthropology at home,” leading a number of incredibly enriching and interesting interviews with neighbours, friends and relatives in Berlin. I discovered a rich literature on the anthropology of smell, the history of hygiene and scents also succeeding in doing much reading. The COVID-19 pandemic, I need to remind myself again and again now that we have access to childcare and feel less pressured in our everyday lives, is far from over: In fact, in many parts of the world, it has only just begun. It has made visible growing global disparities and the more general state of existential planetary crisis that we live in.





*The author at her home office desk (Photo: C. Liebelt).*

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## Footnotes

[1] Caffeggiando remains closed in late July 2020 and we have not been able to reach Massimo.

[2] It took almost a week until the result arrived; he was tested negative.

[3] In early July, we decide to postpone the workshop once more, to mid-April 2021.

[4] A few weeks later, they returned to play in the backyard.

[5] This essay was published in early July under the title “**Thinking Sex in Times of Corona**”.

[6] A few days later, Ulaş indeed receives a call and goes to pick up the braces in a nearby hostel for the homeless.