

Collecting COVID-19

A crowd-sourced digital ethnography of the COVID-19 Pandemic



Contributions from Germany

They call it ~~social~~ physical distancing

Elders, unhoused people and grassroots support in Leipzig, Germany

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SARS-CoV-2 continues to send shockwaves around the world. The pandemic holds us in its grip and causes pain, suffering and mounting insecurities about the future. Much has been said and written about containment measures and their impact on our world and our societies. Underneath the meta-conversations lies the immediacy of lived experience. How we respond to the pains and uncertainties, the isolation and loneliness unfolding around us. How we mourn the lives that have been lost and worry about those with symptoms. How solidarity and hope connect us. How we steer through each day and shoulder the events that mark it.

I am an anthropologist and I conduct collaborative, long-term fieldwork with unhoused people in Leipzig, Germany. I accompany unhoused research collaborators through their everyday on their terms, to shed light on some of the intricacies of their lived experiences and points of view. I have adjusted, but not stopped this work during the pandemic and therefore saw its effects on those without the security of permanent housing unfolding in real-time. Additionally, I am directly involved in the COVID-19 response for people without housing and other vulnerable groups and am thus witness to dynamics, practices and emotional labour between people who live on the streets, grassroots solidarity movements, aid agencies, city and politicians.

In this piece, I invite you to come along on a written walkthrough of the social world which I currently navigate. This piece connects poetry with description. It seeks to take you on a necessarily fragmented journey through some of the feelings, the words and silences, the presences and absences, the ambiguities and nuances which mark this moment. It reflects on the impact of ~~social~~ physical distancing measures, on the hardship they cause and on the ingenuity with which some people seek to lessen their effects.

Grassroots solidarity measures

Gift fences^[1]

The streets lie empty
as I take loneliness for a walk
accompanied only by my unsteady shadow
we pass a gift tree
and suddenly
it dawns on me
I might not see people
but they are here
and they know
so am I

This poem reflects on the situation of people without housing whose lives are no longer permeated by human connection and conversations; who can no longer read several newspapers daily because the places offering them had to close, and who rarely hear the stories that circulate. It shows, however, that even without the option of physical human contact, of conversation, others have found ways to lend a helping hand. One such way is through gift fences.



A gift fence in Leipzig. Photo credit: Luisa T. Schneider.

Gift fences (Gabenzäune)—which had been rarities outside of Hamburg—have now been erected in many German cities. Based on the motto “act together for solidarity”, they are grassroots initiatives where volunteers support people who cannot cover the wherewithal of life. Gift fences are a reaction to the halt in public life which turns the current moment into an existential struggle for those who rely on additional income streams—such as panhandling or collecting deposit bottles. Through such fences support can be given without breaking the contact ban. A fence can be started by anyone, anywhere. The fences are equipped with weatherproof information material and with clean, labelled and packaged donation bags. Donations include groceries (for people and animals), hygiene products, tissues, clothes etc. These can be taken freely and anonymously by anyone in need.

In Leipzig, numerous fences have been erected at different nodes across the city. Responsibility for managing a fence connects neighbours who would not have met otherwise. After organizing themselves on social media, they help others together. To many of my research collaborators without housing these fences not only mean much-needed resources but are also a sign that people think about them, care for them and wish them well. To many, this strengthened a sense of belonging to the ‘everyone’ which politicians reference when they speak about the pandemic. They hope that the fences will continue beyond the present moment and that they will one day meet some of the people who stock them.

Ecken wecken[2].

I wish this pandemic would never stop
terrible I know

but it has been kind to me

I can tell people that my orchid is blooming
last year my only hope was that someone will notice
by accidentally looking up at my window



Observations from domestic quarantine in Leipzig. Photo credit: Luisa T. Schneider.

This poem is based on conversations with elders for whom the corona pandemic enabled human connection in previously unimaginable ways. This is thanks to numerous grassroots initiatives and voluntary organizations who lend support to those who need it. One such initiative was launched by the foundation “Ecken Wecken (Awaken corners)” in Leipzig. It connects volunteers with beneficiaries who need aid—for instance, someone to shop for them or walk their dog. The support is aimed at older and sick people, people in domestic quarantine, people with disabilities, single parents and families of employees who work in what has been termed ‘systemically relevant areas.’ 17 days after the add was published, 951 helpers had already registered with the foundation. “Ecken Wecken” is one of many

initiatives who report that large numbers of people step forward to volunteer their time. Many of these initiatives use digital networking to respond to needs in their physical environment.

Not only did the pandemic separate and isolate, it also forged new connections and kinship between strangers. The distance of bodies does not equal distance of mind. It is my hope that these bonds will last beyond the containment measures and will help us to reconsider the value of social solidarity and the common good in a political sense. The current support mechanisms reach beyond the provision of goods and services. They are creative means to counter isolation and loneliness without putting others in harm's way. A volunteer slipping a note into a bag with groceries before putting it on a gift fence; a volunteer talking with a woman in quarantine—whom he just bought groceries—through the closed door; a person in home-office drawing a picture for the person who delivers their food....all these moments are acts of kindness and antidotes to social and emotional suffering.



Thanking delivery workers in Vienna. Photo credit: Cemil Özkan.

Despite the pain, loss and hardship, it may be a time like this—and the actions that mark it—which lead some people to reconsider humanity as an integrated and connected superorganism^[3] rather than a mass of disparate individuals. An organism which must survive collectively and can therefore not

trample on some pieces without failing altogether. An organism which needs the world to survive and must, therefore, take better care of it.

The contact ban and people without tenancy-protected housing

Not alone – with myself

it must be tough to be alone
say the policemen
who chase me away
pity written across their faces
but I am not alone
I reply
I am
with my self
and the world
they laugh
bewildered
looking down at the lumpen
leaning against a tree
has he lost his mind?
the feeling is mutual
because
busy in the treadmills of society
they have never spent
enough time
with themselves
or the world
to know what I mean

This poem was written for those unhoused people who have taught me the difference between a home and a house and who have shown me that being alone is not the same as loneliness.

Many unhoused people rely on fictive kin—so-called families of choice—for subsistence, survival, security and wellbeing. In Germany, this is now no longer possible due to the contact ban which was issued to fight the pandemic. Now, spending time in public is only permitted alone, with one other person (plus romantic partners) or with household members. A distance of at least 1.5 m must be kept between all other people. Families of choice do not count as households. Hence, many support chains have been broken and most squats and camps now lie deserted.



From a home for all to a wasteland, gentrification in Leipzig. Photo credit: Luisa T. Schneider

All around me I have seen how people struggle with the fact that the very company which provided such strength previously, is now connected to potential harm. The measures that make being together conditional on official housing, are therefore immensely painful. What is more, the empty city is a constant reminder that their loved ones are nowhere to be seen and impossible to reach. While some people find solace and comfort with themselves and in nature (as the above poem shows) other people struggle with emotions of abandonment, loneliness and the fear of being forgotten. In the following poems, I will highlight various aspects of this pain.

Wording the silence

Jürgen (23), whom I have accompanied for a little over two years, has been diagnosed with schizophrenia and has spent considerable time in hospitals before coming to Leipzig and joining a community of rough sleepers. During our last encounter he spoke, without pausing, for over an hour and then ended by saying:

I speak so much because the silence has gotten so loud
it is ringing in my ears
I need to get it out
speak it out
before it makes my head explode

Behind Glass

I caress the wrinkles on my friend's forehead
through the glass of the picture frame
and think of her
I still get up at dawn

but by 6.00 am—when it would be time for the first walk
I no longer know what to do
Time has stretched in the hours between 6.00 am and darkness
The streets lie empty outside my window
making me fear for my friends without walls
I recently noticed that I speak to myself
and I have memorised the ticking of the clock
I wonder whether the socks I knitted in anticipation of my first grandchild
will still fit when I get to meet her
...
if I get to meet her before my window closes
or if all she will have of me
is a pair of baby socks and a picture of a wrinkled face behind glass

This poem is written for an old woman who used to work in a bakery during the GDR. She knows many of the rough sleeping elders from “before” when they were still housed. After her husband and many of her friends had passed away, she found company with these men. I call her often in an attempt to shrink the pain of containment but have no answer when she asks me if Frank got to see his daughter, how Heinz is faring in prison and if Gisella is still haunted by radiation. I do not know because I have not been able to find them.

For those who do not live in the virtual world

How is Palo
dunno
haven't seen him in weeks
maybe fine maybe bad
maybe shelter, maybe prison, maybe dead
and Pete?
same
and Clara?
ditto
who have you seen?
you

After the contact ban had been issued, I witnessed a near-collapse of the mechanisms through which unhoused people support each other. The criminalisation of self-organised support by and for unhoused people alongside a restructuring of the official aid available to them made the dependency on a retreating network of aid agencies near total. The contact of most street workers has been sped up to minimise the risk of infection. Yet, they are often the only human contact in a day.

Being in touch with loved ones is essential in this situation. While the physical world has shrunk massively, people around the world are virtually connected. But those without housing rarely have cell-phones and are therefore unable to call to check in on each other. What is more, some support structures are now only available via phone. Because patterns of movement have been interrupted and day centres closed many people lost sight of each other. Sometimes, I fear, we forget how exclusive this virtual world is which holds us.

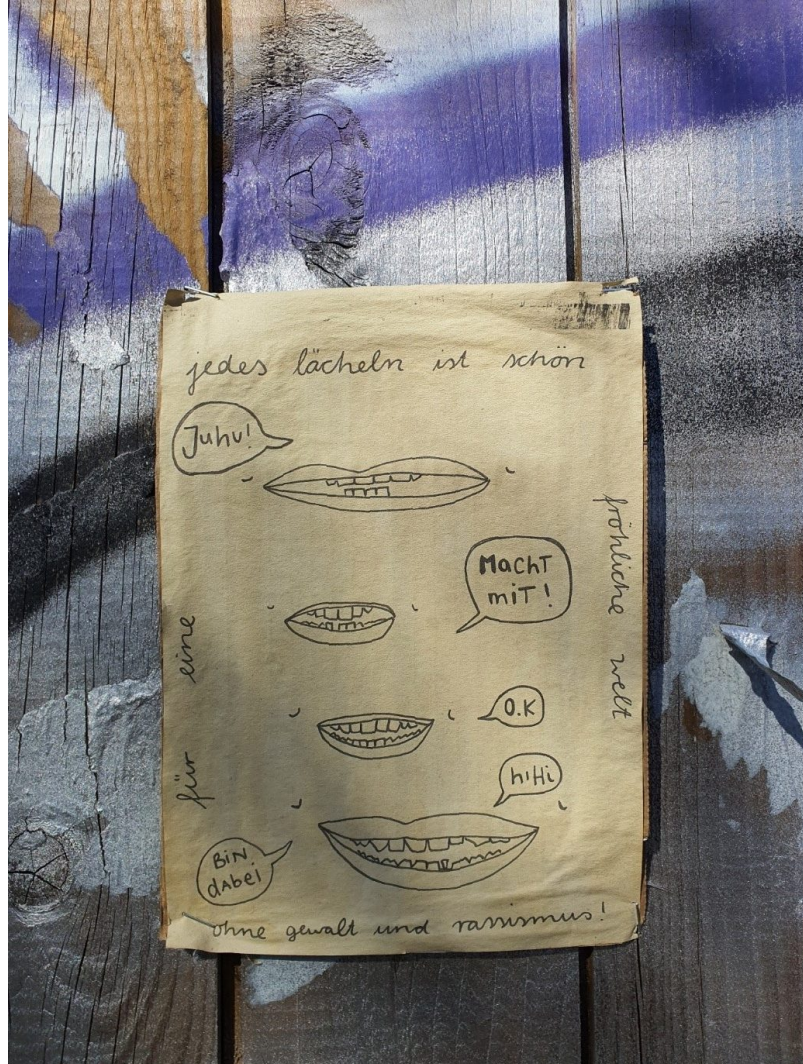
About hate

viruses make weary

people seem insecure about who is an enemy and who is a friend

This poem is for those people who have been hurt by those searching for an outlet for their fear and uncertainty. Difficult times trigger antagonistic responses. Some people move closer together and hold a protective hand over one another. Others feel entirely paralyzed. Others move apart and point fingers to imagined culprits. In the past months, many rough sleepers have been attacked. Some have been spat at, beaten, cursed or humiliated. They have been told that they are carriers of the virus or that they should get infected and die. Without their protective structures and without a possibility to call for help, many are fully exposed to attacks.

Hate cannot stop viruses, but love might help us heal. Keeping a distance from one another for the sake of protection differs significantly from attempts at creating insurmountable distances between ourselves and others. To lessen the suffering caused by this crisis and support each other we must spell out fears to lessen their power. We must recognize and counter the vulnerability we have placed some people in and replace the tools we have taken from them. And we must counter growing structural, individual and interpersonal inequalities and reject mistreatment.



Art for a world without violence and racism, Leipzig. Photo credit: Luisa T. Schneider.

Leaving no one behind

Water?
 Check
 Food?
 Hopefully later
 Cash?
 I've got 1.17
 I've got 0.50
 I've got nothing
 Who needs it?
 I think Sassy she is still weak
 Who can bring it?
 Me
 When I collect more water

This poem is about a group of rough sleepers who continue to support one another through an elaborate system of drop and pick-up points and two daily meetings where they stand in a circle two meters apart from each other.

To many unhoused people, the political message that the success of containment measures depend on the compliance and support of 'everyone' implies that to be a contributing member of this group, one can abide by such measures. Such a statement suggests that states do not consider those who have been placed in a position without acceptable moves to be members of society deserving of protection, much less members who can (and wish to) protect others too.

About love

are you a drunk, a junkie or a crazy person?
under 27 or over 60?
shed the tags they put on you
here you are but human
like all of us
with the very special stuff
that makes you unique

This poem is about rough sleepers who reject the keywords they have been labelled with on their journeys through the aid system. Too often it is assumed that those without traditional domestic structures are also without the agency to live as they choose. Such an assumption, inherently flawed, becomes especially damaging during a time of crisis, when unhoused people, are neither consulted nor considered. Yet, their survival skills, creativity and collective responsibility could provide invaluable lessons for all of us who are in desperate need of measures that consider that ways of being in the world and living in the world are diverse and that our responses must be too.

Instead of accepting this silencing, many unhoused people have decided to collect evidence, lessons learned and possible measures ranging from locally developed collaborative action to alternative ideas for quarantine, protection, subsistence and care. Many seek ways to take care of each other. Others pledge not to give up. Their unwavering empathy and other grassroots initiatives which spring up all around us make me hope (maybe naively) that we will not fall back into old ways but forge new paths that entail greater politics of care.

[1] <https://gabenzaun.de/>

[2] <https://www.stiftungen.org/news/stiftung-ecken-wecken-organisiert-corona-nachbarschaftshilfe-in-leipzig-und-gibt-erfahrungen-gerne.html>

[3] <https://greattransitionstories.org/patterns-of-change/humanity-as-a-superorganism/>

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