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# (Post-)pandemic Somatechnics, Neoliberalism, and the Return to (Academic) Normalcy: Digital Conversations

**Ladan Rahbari and Evelien Geerts**

**Abstract:**

This essay consists of a set of digital (post-)pandemic email correspondence held between a political sociologist and an interdisciplinary philosopher working at western European universities while the COVID-19 pandemic rapidly unfolded itself. Starting from an unsettling point in time in 2021, during which vaccination strategies and numerous eugenic pandemic containment measures were being discussed, the authors touch upon issues as diverse as the importance of embodied feminist theorising in pandemic crisis times; neoliberal extractive capitalism's influence on society, pandemic (mis)management, and higher education; the problematic (post-)pandemic business-as-usual-narrative; grief, mourning, and trauma; the power of anger and protesting; and the forced return to normal(cy). These conversations are held together by an irruptions-based methodology based on Deleuze and Guattari (2000). This methodology tries to make sense of the (post-)pandemic as a disruptive event while forming the backdrop for conversational and critical theoretical snippets, self-designed memes, and critical race, queer, disability, and feminist theoretical perspectives that all conceptualise (post-)pandemic somatechnics as a 'form of ethico-political critical practice' (Sullivan and Murray 2011: vii).

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**Keywords:** academia, COVID-19 pandemic; care; crisis; (critique of) neoliberalism; feminist theory; (post-)pandemic somatechnics; "normal(cy)."

## Reflections on the Irruptive: A Pre- and Postscript

This essay consists of a set of digital (post-)pandemic conversations held between the two authors: a political sociologist and an interdisciplinary philosopher working at western European universities. Through these conversations, we exchanged theoretical reflections about everything that transpired during the pandemic, including our own vulnerabilities. We also found solace and solidarity at a time when our lives – along with those of millions of other embodied beings across the globe – were profoundly impacted by the uncertainties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This prescript – which is simultaneously a postscript – has been added to emulate the COVID-19 pandemic's time-bending qualities; qualities we recently experienced again while forcing ourselves to travel back from a 2023 (post-)pandemic[1] world to the pandemic disruptions and existential confusion that affected us between 2021 and 2022.

Queerings of time appear to have been central to people's (post-)pandemic experience worldwide: COVID-19 seemingly has sped up lived experiences of time for some of us, while simultaneously and paradoxically also slowing it down. In 2020, "lockdown life" appeared to be less hectic for some and remained stressful for many but looking back at the time between 2020-2022 with 2023 perspective, time has flown by so incredibly fast for us. Not wanting to get too lost in temporal reflections here, we do want to note that, as queer theorist Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* (2006) also summarised it, spatio-

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temporally re-orienting oneself requires major disruption and disorientation – which brings us to the idea of – and methodology of – irruptions.

Stemming from the Latin *irruptiō* (a sudden burst), irruptions come close to interruptions but carry an even more forceful connotation: In contrast to what environmental studies scholar Rob Nixon describes as 'slow violence' – or that what 'occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space' (2011: 2) – irruptions disrupt spatiotemporal normalcy completely, forcing us to rethink our previous directions and orientations. The COVID-19 pandemic could be read as an irruptive, re-orienting event if we were to use a Deleuzoguattarian lens: conceptualised in philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* (2000), irruption is entangled with revolutionary desire; a desire for a new and better world. Irruptions – including the most brutal irruptions, such as pandemic ones – cause disorientation while at the same time bearing the potential actualisation of change. Such an affirmative twist does not deny the pain and suffering inflicted by the pandemic; it acknowledges it while also providing the theoretical space to question normalcy and linear temporality.

In line with the feminist methodology of diffraction (Haraway 1997; Barad 2007) that forefronts a more situated knowledges-embedded – and thus somatechnics-appropriate (also see Sullivan and Murray 2011) – way of theorising, an irruptions-filled methodology allows us to bring fragmented personal but also theoretical snippets, memes, thought-provoking concepts, and various critical theoretical perspectives together while creating space to affirmatively re-orient ourselves. And because of its more embodied, somatechnics-appropriate characteristics, this irruptive methodology additionally allows us to conceptualise our own lived somatechnical experiences of and with the (post)-pandemic as

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'form of ethico-political critical practice' (Sullivan and Murray 2011: vii), giving our conversations ethico-political depth.

In the following conversations, we exchange various theoretical insights and personal experiences as we contemplate the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. We express how our perception of time gets reshaped, specifically in relation to the change in pace during the pandemic irruption, an unfamiliar perception for us since within the structure of a neoliberal university where the concept of slowness has seemingly vanished. We further contemplate and mourn re-envisioning a "new normal" without reincorporating the hyper-individualistic neoliberal tendencies of the past that made the old normal exhausting and unequal.

As noted earlier, this prescript has to simultaneously be read as our article's postscript. The following correspondence, presented in the form of email exchanges between the authors, may seem unconventional for an academic paper. In spite of this, we have made the deliberate choice to preserve its original format to retain the conversational essence and the influence of the (post-)pandemic's irruptions on our tone. This conversation was part of the inspiration behind both authors' recent academic papers on (post-)pandemic politics (see Geerts 2022; Rahbari 2023), in which we have further reflected on our embodied pandemic-related experiences and embedded them within a larger body of literature on somatechnics, the (post-)Anthropocene, neoliberalism, and what constitutes (post-)pandemic "normalcy."

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**From:** Evelien Geerts

**Sent:** February 1, 2021

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Dear Ladan,

I have been thinking a lot about the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had and, unfortunately, still is having, on us.

A few things have been bothering me during the past eleven months or so, although I am having difficulty conceptualising them. I thought I would share some of my frustrations via email to see if we could find common ground. And, who knows, even do something "productive" (ugh, how I have come to hate that word!!) with these possibly shared frustrations? Many revolve around the intertwined ideas of normalcy, (re)productivity, and neoliberal extractive capitalism. This morning, for instance, I was struck by how the Belgian media reported on a petition asking the government to prioritise young people regarding Belgium's COVID-19 pandemic management and vaccination strategy. This message – and specifically how it was sensationally reported on by the two main Flemish news channels – annoyed me. Given that there is no vaccination strategy yet, I am getting increasingly agitated about special interest groups popping up here and there. Groups that, looked at from scientific and socio-political points of view, do not appear to consist of those subjects hit the hardest by the virus.

Mind you, we are *all* being hit hard by this pandemic, but *how* we are being hit and what resources and strategies we have at our disposal certainly differs. Two of my favourite critical theorists have pointed this out recently: Rosi Braidotti (2020: 466) comments on how the category of the human in these posthumanist times still is 'a normative category that indexes access to privileges and entitlements.' Subjects already dehumanised based on their embodied-embrained conditions, in other words, do not seem to count much when it comes to pandemic protection. Alexis Shotwell tackles this (non-)mattering question as well. Her

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'The Virus is a Relation' (2020) essay radically rethinks our relational entanglements with this more-than-human entity – the SARS-CoV-2 virus – in relation to bodily vulnerability, the planet's ecosystem, and care. This emphasis on more-than-human interdependence and a feminist redistribution of care – topics that should be central to a critical analysis of a (post-)pandemic somatechnics – connects a lot of critical thinkers working on (de)humanisation and caring in crisis times (e.g., Haraway 2016; de la Bellacasa 2017; Chatzidakis et al. 2020).

Riffing off of these thinkers' ideas for a minute: how contradictory can a society be – or how neatly self-interiorised are the neoliberal adagios of hyper-individualisation, hyper-responsibilisation, and maximum (re)productivity – that it would prioritise exactly *those* bodies & minds that appear to not be hit as hard by the virus over those that have been put to work to keep the healthcare system and other institutions going? While folks of old age, with clinical vulnerabilities, and with certain co-morbidities, are left behind? This is not an exceptional situation – worn-down bodies & minds have never been capitalism's favourite: Black, brown, queer, and/or disabled bodies & minds have always been regarded as extractive capitalism's fodder. Paula Chakravartty and Denise Ferreira da Silva (2012: 363) have a point when stating that late liberal and neoliberal capitalism are characterised by a 'racial and colonial logic;' a logic that drives processes of (non-)mattering. Still, this already dire situation has only intensified since the pandemic's start.

There is much more to be said about which bodies & minds are made to matter – or *not matter* – in these harsh times, of course. It would moreover be interesting to delve into critical race and queer studies-oriented perspectives on the west's obsession with the imagery of the supposedly pure, white, always-to-be-protected child (Edelman's *No Future* [2004] and Chen's *Animacies* [2012] immediately come to mind here), but let me end this

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email message by saying that I am SO FED UP BY EVERYTHING that I do not even have the energy to sign off with a self-made meme … and that says a lot …

Hopeful, but also angry and frustrated …

Evelien

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**From:** Ladan Rahbari

**Sent:** February 5, 2021

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Dear Evelien,

I will be short as I feel rather tired today. I opened your email and your frustration leaked through your words. I hear you. I, too, have come across unsettling imagery. Watching hundreds of people rallying to oppose regulations to control COVID-19's spread using messages of "freedom for the sake of freedom" in the middle of a global crisis of health, life, and "living" has been disturbing, to say the least. Alas, neoliberalism is quite cunning, and it adapts quickly. It adopts revolutionary tones tailored to fit the needs of those who most often already hold the megaphones.

I felt your frustration, but nothing is better than receiving a letter from a philosopher friend while in lockdown. I savour your words. I must admit I missed a meme complementing your email, showcasing your beautiful mind. If a mind like yours cannot do what it does best, I can imagine how badly the pandemic affected you. I cannot imagine how the pandemic affected those who have been hit the heaviest, those without stable employment and a place to call home, and those struggling to live. How can I? How can any of us?

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I read your email, sitting in my living room. I have a warm tea on a tabletop beside me. I have just chatted with my mother. She was calling with unstable internet from the north-west of Iran and got interrupted by my niece, whom she cares for daily when my sister – a healthcare worker – works. I have not seen them physically for a few years, but I know they are "fine." As long as that is the case, I only need to worry about my PowerPoint presentation for the class I teach this week. I feel slightly tired, but there is nothing a good cup of cinnamon tea and honey will not solve. Today, COVID-19 can stay in the background, vaguely but surely. This is me on a good day.

On a bad day, I mourn. I mourn the slow destruction of my personal life. I mourn losing people. I mourn and feel ashamed of feeling lonely. I fear for those getting stuck at the borders, hostile to their bodies. I mourn the lives lost and the lives that face death, harm, and infection. I think of what I recently read: Judith Butler and George Yancy (2020: 385) talking about mourning; that mourning is a transnational political practice that crosses boundaries, as you mourn 'the loss of someone whose name you do not know, whose language you may not speak, who lives at an unbridgeable distance from where you live.'

Yet, I do not know if I can turn my mourning into something useful. Despite its empathic potential, my mourning has no potential to solidarise with others. I cannot extend a hand to anyone. Not even to you. Even you, who always ask me how I am, even when you were at your own worst.

Mourning might connect us, but morbidly, even in that, we are vastly dissimilar. One mourns not feeling the comfort of "normalcy," and the other mourns the loss of a family member far away while in exile. COVID-19 have globally spread, but the way we mourn, perish, suffer, survive, and continue to "live" is not caused by the same "human condition."

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Or am I wrong, my friend?

Yours,

Ladan

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**From:** Evelien Geerts

**Sent:** February 6, 2021

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Dear Ladan,

Your words, thoughts, and ideas certainly provide some solace – I guess I am simultaneously glad and saddened by the fact that you recognise this myriad of complex, contradictory feelings that are haunting me ... and are haunting so many others, whose existential condition is one of total precarity right now.

Looking at it through the lens of precarity, I can still call myself lucky and, even more so, extremely privileged: I am writing this from within the comfort of my heated bedroom/teaching room/theory-producing desk /virtual social gathering spot/ ... I have not been outside much since our first national lockdown in Belgium in March 2020: although I most likely had COVID-19 already in the spring (seems likely, given the extreme fatigue and flareups that have been plaguing me since then), I am clinically vulnerable; was without health care for months because of an issue with my academic employer abroad; and am also very protective of those around me ... At the same time, I am also the hermit philosopher-type who does not mind watching and analysing people from afar.

I will probably never understand what it is like to have not seen my family in person for years, nor is my body labelled as such that border-crossing is a thing to even think about

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(unless I am traveling to the United States, and then I am still welcomed as a white western European with tons of privileges). All I can do, is try and feel what that is like, reach out, and listen. I miss my international family of fantastic queerdos a lot, though, too: these people give me life and have carved out precious space for me in their hearts and universes. It has been excruciating to not be with them. We are, of course, still close, virtually. And although queer kin is there through thick and thin, South Africa, the Netherlands, and Sweden are like faraway galaxies now? Even a village on the other side of Flanders seems to be located on a different continent these days.

Space and time really have gotten a new meaning, haven't they, amidst these pandemic irruptions? Or was everything just accelerating way too fast already before the pandemic hit?

Where do we draw the line between so-called revolutionary hope-filled protests and "protests" that are carried out by proto-fascist antivaxx mobs, whose definition of revolution is driven by xenophobic hate, ressentiment, and existential insecurity? What is fascism these days anyway, or rather, where *isn't* fascism at work these days?

Let me start with a self-created meme to lighten the mood a bit before delving into the issue of spacetime. Like Butler (in Butler and Yancy 2020: 483), whose most recent piece on the COVID-19 pandemic, grieving, and the condition of 'global vulnerability' you mention here, I believe in the radical potential of theory. Butler in *Undoing Gender* (2004) argues that theory itself can be transformative, as philosophical concepts carry another world *in* and *with* them. Concepts are like tiny imaginaries waiting to blossom; visions of the future, ready to be actualised. Going from the level of the conceptual to the worldly takes time, and,

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more importantly, also asks a lot of labour from us (and especially from those that are automatically put in a position of providing free, unrecognised labour).

What do memes have to do with all of this? For me, memes share some of that visionary potential of a philosophical concept. Memes are not going to change the world on their own (and looking at the abundance of neo-fascist Pepe the Frog-memes on the internet, let's be happy they do not possess that kind of power), but these digitally-spread – and constantly tweaked – images carry socio-political commentary with them and provoke certain affective responses in their audience, especially when looked at through a Deleuzoguattarian micropolitical perspective (Deleuze and Guattari 2000). Memes thus convey something contemporary, but they also plant seeds for the future while always reworking the past. And it is the latter aspect of seed-planting that made me further reflect upon the function of philosophy in times of crisis (which is the discipline I was trained in, but have also tried to push to its limits, as western philosophy is so gung-ho about epistemological gatekeeping).

The self-created meme below is a queer drag-inspired diss at philosophy's fellow academic disciplines of anthropology and sociology – memes are at their most powerful when not explained! – but it captures some of the going-against-the-grain facets of the materialist philosophy I am most invested in. And said meme simultaneously addresses some of the problematic window-dressing aspects of philosophy that I do not wish to reproduce.

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**Figure 1 [2021]. 'Faaaancy a Sliiiice.' (*Subversive Philosophy Memes*:**

https://estarthewicked.tumblr.com/post/641599000857985024/faaaancy-a-sliiiiceofwas-vern%C3%BCnftig-ist-das-ist?is_highlighted_post=1)

When I created the above meme, I was thinking about space, time, and place and what place there currently is for thinking, reflecting upon, theorising from within the world, philosophising … in my life right now. Not a lot, I'm afraid ... I am feeling rather ... lost these days. But I am also convinced that things can still be done differently.

I have to log off now – Zoom fatigue is real! But I would love to explore these spacetime questions more deeply and focus on how the disorientation that we started experiencing during the pandemic – and also already way before, being part of an extremely neoliberal higher education system that expects us to just get up, leave, and move around the globe – feels like it is here to stay?

You *have*, by the way, extended a hand to so many of us ...

Evelien

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**From:** Ladan Rahbari

**Sent:** March 4, 2021

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Dear Evelien,

It took me a while to find the time to sit and write this response. I intentionally avoided turning this letter into another "task" on my whiteboard, hanging above my head. I waited for that moment of slowness when my brain let go of all the little worries of the day. Slowness does not come to me easily anymore. I had to go and open Milan Kundera's *Slowness* (1996: 1) and read the first page, and I immediately found this: 'Speed is the form of ecstasy the technical revolution has bestowed on man.'

The technical revolution bestowed on 'man'; I repeat. It always amazes me to unravel the power behind discourse. I first read *Slowness* in Farsi – a non-gendered language – where the word 'man' (*mard*) does not refer to humanity, and the word 'human' (*bashar*) does not originate from the word 'man.' I had to go back and check the original publication of *Slowness* in French. Unsurprisingly, Kundera wrote '*l'homme*' in French with the same gendered connotations as "man" in English. I was talking about slowness and got dragged into this discourse analysis. Insignificant as it may seem, this unintended example reveals how little moments of our existence are entangled with gendered notions. As Rosi Braidotti's critical posthumanism has shown us, this same 'man' is envisaged as the alleged universal measure of everything. I feel like I am preaching to the choir now. Let me get back to my initial thoughts.

The ecstasy that Kundera talked about then is far from what we experience today. Thinking of it consciously, I did not think about pace before the pandemic. All the rhythms

of life – from sleeping to working, swallowing ready-made food, making plans for the next semester, for the summer break, waiting for review, waiting for visas – all happened at the same pace. Surely, I was awaiting some more enthusiastically than others, but I knew deep inside that time passed with the same pace. It must be that disorientation you talk about that makes me feel differently about time now. Some rare moments are now stretched, and others are shrunk. I can feel my mind try to push the latter's invisible edges to expand them, a useless exercise. I am not on ecstasy, by the way, except perhaps on the type Kundera talked about. Slowness does not come to me often anymore.

You wrote about the 'extremely neoliberal higher education system that expects us just to get up, leave, and move around the globe.' Nothing can be closer to reality. There is the expectation that no matter what goes wrong on any level, you need to get the "job" done one way or the other. The job shall be done. The job must be done. You talk about thwarting the structures of the corporate university from the inside. When I read your email – some days ago – I was unsure whether I saw a way to do that. And then it dawned on me that you had already put the puzzle pieces together. It is not always about what we are and do now but rather about what we are and do across spacetime. Unlike you and I, your memes traverse the globe. They are seen and perceived and carry something of yours in them. Perhaps they are not always understood how you intended them to be. That in itself is powerful and even revolutionary. Our existence pours out of us and materialises in different forms that continue to exist besides, beyond, and despite us. There is still "hope." I choose to hold on to this thought, even though for the briefest moment.

Yours,

Ladan

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**From:** Evelien Geerts

**Sent:** April 1, 2021

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Dear Ladan,

It seems that I got caught up by the ever-accelerating speed of contemporary neoliberal academia this time ... it has been a hectic month, packed with contradictions, oppositions, and ambiguities. I feel that pandemic pull slowing down because I am physically, intellectually, and emotionally exhausted – but I also feel torn apart by guilt and imposter syndrome, which all force me to work *harder*, *better*, *faster* ... Waiting on that moment of slowness is like waiting for Godot these days. And isn't it funny how philosophy and literature always speak to us when we crave to be spoken to?

Your message by the way so aptly summarises how I am feeling right now. I think those moments when we reflect upon our daily rhythms, pace, speeds … only come to us when we feel out of pace/space/place? This reminds me of the following wonderful passage in Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* (which I might have already brought up during one of our conversations – I honestly do not know where my over-/understimulated ADHD brain is at right now ...), where Ahmed (2006: 5–6) says the following:

> In order to become orientated, you might suppose that we must first experience disorientation. When we are orientated, we might not even notice that we are orientated: we might not even think 'to think' about this point. When we experience disorientation, we might notice orientation as something we do not have.

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I adore this passage, not just because it has been written down in one of my favourite philosophy books of all time – how Ahmed criticises how western philosophy for centuries has been practiced as paperless philosophy, implying it was seen as a non-materialist activity of the mind, and, mostly, of the minds of white upper-class straight men who could afford to engage in armchair philosophy, is just incredibly relevant – but also because Ahmed phenomenologically captures the disorientation we are currently experiencing, more than one year into this pandemic. The irruptive stretching out and shrinking of various moments in spacetime are definitely happening individually. But I also think that we are collectively realising things must change.

To put it more existentially: now that our regular onto-epistemological frameworks and temporal patterns of meaning-making have brutally come to a halt – and let us not forget, for many already pre-pandemic vulnerable folks, these patterns truly were *brutally* halted – we are lost. And at a loss. For words; thoughts; actions ... Grieving and mourning for what was, to go back to that wonderful Butler text you referred to last time, but probably also grieving for what is *yet-to-come*? There isn't just pain in feeling disoriented – although those ruptures one experiences can be extremely hard – but there is pain in having to reorientate oneself again, and certainly so when that happens *en masse*.

How do we even get started? Are we going to move towards a "new normal" (How do I despise the word "normal" ...!), and do we even wish to do so? Do we really want something that reeks of the old neoliberal hyper-individualising normal? Cause that ideology, quite frankly put, stinks, and neoliberal extractive capitalism is what got us in this pandemic mess to begin with ... I want to step out of all of these systems that see subjects as completely replaceable and disposable individuals – an ideology that now has become part

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of higher education well: we are now not only told to compete with folks that are our colleagues; decades of neoliberal marketisation and consumerism have also forced us to start competing with ourselves ... '*If I could just teach non-stop from 9-6, write from 7-11, and prep for classes from 11-1—that's the only way to get all my publications out this year!*' We all know that voice in our head, telling us to keep going, no matter how exhausted we are; no matter how impossible it is to keep eternally uprooting oneself to have that permanent tenure track position.

I still remember how I, during a previous job, was told that I had overworked myself by having gone to two conferences (which I had signed up for, partly to see my queer family abroad) while on a more than full-time teaching contract. I was not only scolded for doing something that would eventually land me a better position – while supposedly pretending to be "better" than my colleagues, because I was trying to get ahead, like a good neoliberal citizen-worker! – but the harsh conditions and über-flexible environment of the job I was doing at the same were completely ignored. If I ended up getting burnt out because of the latter, not a lot of people would have cared – I was only on a non-permanent contract, "good enough" to design and teach classes on an assistant professor level but too-easily-replaceable to get the credit for it, to eventually be discarded when used up.

This all brings me back to the paperless philosophy idea from earlier: if we do decide to start seeing philosophy as a materially-rooted praxis, packed with not just intellectual but also physical, emotional, and care-driven labour, how different would this field look? And how different would universities look if these kinds of tasks – that *always* prefigure the intellectual – were taken seriously, regarded as real labour, and paid as such?

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Maybe I should meme-ify that paperless philosophy-critique so Ahmed's poignant material(ist) philosophising can also resonate digitally?

Evelien

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**From:** Ladan Rahbari

**Sent:** June 30, 2021

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Dearest Evelien,

Weeks passed, and I lost track of many things, including this conversation. The world looks a bit less scared of COVID-19 now. This should make me happy and hopeful, and in many ways, I am. But the prospect of 're-opening society' looks scary to me. I am scared of going back to the old routines: office hours and long meetings, traffic jams and busy trains, polluted air, and rivers, animals' corpses on the roadside squashed by cars, sweaty handshakes, and all the things that are part of the pre-pandemic "normal." Is it odd to be afraid and not nostalgic for the old every day? Of that sense of normalcy that so many long for and miss? I think not. I do not feel like I am alone in this. I see signs of not wanting to go back to those routines everywhere. Colleagues, friends, family, and students are not happy to return to the 'good old' days. They were not equally good to everyone, after all.

In your last email, you wrote about Sara Ahmed's (2006: 5–6) passage on (dis)orientation. You spoke of the disorientation we are experiencing due to the pandemic, that as Ahmed (5) put it, '[i]n order to become orientated, you might suppose that we must first experience disorientation.' It seems that we were never oriented, to begin with, and it is only now that we realise it after everything came to a halt and the pandemic forced us into a

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global experience of radical disorientation? We were disoriented before all this happened. And the pain is not in reorientating ourselves but in the realisation that we no longer want the known orientations. We are left in a spin, not knowing which way to go, only knowing the paths we do not want to take.

Returning to the known is synonymous with performing the unpaid and invisibilised physical, emotional, and care labour you mentioned. Care is invisible to a socially privileged few who make it appear as though only those who are somehow deficient need care, as Julie A. White and Joan C. Tronto (2004) discuss. In a rather non-Trontonian way, I am becoming pessimistic and cynical of a real change and unsure if there is a way out of the labour patterns we know. I have been thinking of this year, full of heartbreaks, loneliness, panic, and stress caused by work and uncertain living conditions. Yet, my '*I hope this email finds you well*'-message has stayed intact; so have my appearance on others' screens, my automatic out-of-office email, my declaration of "being fine" when I am asked, "how I am doing" and all my attempts to appear in control. It is as if my whole identity is built around the performance of functionality, the habitus of neoliberal self-efficiency. '*For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*,' said Audre Lorde (1983: 99). I do not blame myself, us, or anyone for trying to survive the system the best way they can. I am uncertain, however, whether, perhaps due to being disoriented for so long, we have lost sight of what the master's tools are.

Weeks have gone by, and the more I look forward, the more I fear, if not grieve, the future yet to come. I recently noticed that when I talk to the students about change, decolonisation, and academia, I do not feel the same conviction in my voice as I used to have. Maybe it is just a result of the exhaustion from the massive workload of this past year,

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or indeed the realism of someone on the inside who has to speak of a 'hope' of which she, herself, is no longer convinced.

Yours,

Ladan

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**From:** Evelien Geerts

**Sent:** April 15, 2022

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Dear Ladan,

It has been a while since we last emailed – although we did collaborate on another project recently and were finally able to meet up over the summer in Antwerp. In fact, you were the first person I had a coffee with after a year and a half of quasi-non-stop isolation … and time has been flying by like crazy again.

I hear you when you talk about Lorde and the incredibly neoliberalised state of higher education. We both seem to be working at academic institutions that have adopted a neoliberal business-as-usual approach before other universities (also other countries) did, and it all feels … off? Even now? Although Belgium – the country where I am still living while digitally working in the UK, thanks to Brexit and administrative healthcare issues that only got solved after a year and delayed all my quite urgent surgeries – is still holding onto some basic protection measures, the pandemic seems to be something from the past. Or dare I say: wilfully ignored by the majority of the (able-bodied) population and motivated by governmental pandemic mismanagement? Socio-political cognitive dissonance is real – and although we all would like this pandemic to be done and over with, we are not quite there

yet. Checking the data, I think we are at twenty-three COVID-19 deaths per day in April 2022, and that appears to be the human price we as a society want to pay to live a "normal" life … Then again, only the opinions of the white able-bodied, middle-class population seem to count here, making me wonder about the pandemic effects on the local elections in 2024 … Given how horribly the extreme right and alt-right have responded to the pandemic crisis in Belgium so far and have created an even bigger support base for spreading dangerous pandemic conspiracy theories, I am honestly quite anxious about yet another fascist future-to-come.

I would have hoped that we, as a society and a global more-than-human community, would have learned more from the pandemic crisis that has hit us – and still is hitting the most vulnerable among us hard? Even now, there are folks out there claiming that COVID-19 is one big hoax, that the vaccines never really worked – and are supposedly "harmful" – and that the Great Barrington declaration-driven strategy of "letting it rip" is the only effective way of dealing with COVID-19 and future pandemics … And "letting it rip" is exactly what is happening now, as one of the narratives being currently sold in the western European media is that Omicron-infections are supposedly milder than infections with previous COVID-19 variants … yet the rates of patients with long COVID-19 seem to simultaneously be on the rise and the clinically vulnerable, even when vaccinated, still have a lot to worry about.

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**Figure 2 [2022]. 'Let It Rip.' (*Subversive Philosophy Memes*:**

https://estarthewicked.tumblr.com/post/681237553452597248/letitgo-letitgoat-letitrip-COVID-19-notagoodidea?is_highlighted_post=1)

'Letting it rip/ Letting it go/ Letting it *go-at*' then – as the above meme, infused by an already existing viral video consisting of goats dressed up in cute *Frozen*-outfits bleating out the *Let It Go*-theme song, points at. In tandem with this problematic "let it rip" –strategy, toxic positivity – a phenomenon that queer theorist Jack Halberstam also dismantles in the normalcy narrative-disrupting book *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) – is currently all around us, too. We are forced to be optimistic about the pandemic's remaining days, and now that the media are focusing on the war waged against Ukraine, scientists that are telling us to remain cautious are labelled as panicky nitwits trapped in what some local politicians dare to call a 'mass psychosis of pandemic fear.'

I remain worried about how this pandemic crisis will pan out, socio-politically speaking, and how future pandemics will be tackled. Will we in the west – yet again – respond in hyper-individualised ways and sacrifice those that do not have a lot of power to speak up? Will we choose to let a hyper-individualised and not-that-liberal conceptualisation

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of positive freedom, not encumbered by liberalism's equally important no harm-principle, trump over everything else? Will this experience influence us so much that we will let democracy-undermining political parties take over? And will we stand by while our educational systems are hollowed out even further so that students will eventually only be taught pre-chewed materials instead of critical thinking skills that could assist them with analysing global crises like this one?

For these reasons and many others, I choose to 'stay with the trouble,' to put it in a Harawayan (2016) manner. As critical theorist Donna Haraway (2016: 1) describes such a non-toxic, reality-rooted response vis-à-vis crises herself:

> In urgent times, many of us are tempted to address trouble in terms of making an imagined future safe, of stopping something from happening that looms in the future, of clearing away the present and the past in order to make futures for coming generations. Staying with the trouble does not require such a relationship to times called the future. In fact, staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings.

Thinking and theorising in times of crisis means that we must get our hands dirty, in the here and now, so that a better future can eventually come about …

Evelien

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**From:** Ladan Rahbari

**Sent:** May 4, 2022

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Dear Evelien,

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Indeed, it has been too long! I was so happy to see your email. I cannot wait for summer to arrive, and I cannot wait to see you again. You always have the best ideas on secret coffee places in the city. I may not share with you an intense love for strong coffee, but I always find our conversations stimulating and invigorating. I remember we also had a short conversation about going on some sort of writing retreat, and then we both got busy and forgot about it. I have been struggling to write and still struggling with post-COVID-19 fatigue. So, whether we actually end up writing or not, perhaps we should revive the idea of "retreating."

I know that things have not been easy for you, not only because of COVID-19 but also because of administrative troubles, health issues, and professional obstacles. I have witnessed a growing frustration among some of my students over the 'let it go'– attitude you mentioned and the pressure of complying with it. '*It is over*,' we hear people and officials say, '*we can now treat it as if it is the flu.*' I am grateful for friends and colleagues like yourself, with whom I do not have to pretend I adhere to toxic positivity.

I recently read an LSE blog post by Ann-Kathrin Rothaermel (2022); a researcher on gender and radicalisation, who compared anti-vaccine and anti-gender movements to each other in an interesting way, discussing that 'both the pandemic and gender-based violence have been shown to interact with ableist, racist and classist societal structures and disproportionately affect people with disabilities as well as communities of color.' I know this is a topic you are currently involved with in your research project, and her words resonated with your analysis that it is the most vulnerable who get bulldosed over by pandemic necropolitics. I know you have been and still are struggling with health problems

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that have been ignored, if not undermined. But we both know the pandemic has only made what was already there more explicit.

What keeps troubling me is the 'we are all in the same boat'-discourse; that pseudo-solidarity phrase gets thrown around while advocating for neoliberal policies that undermine it. I talk about how neoliberalism hinders solidarity in my chapter in Rahil Roodsaz and Katrien De Graeve's book (Rahbari 2021). Let's be honest: we do not see the pandemic as a global issue; we never have. There is the bias you mentioned, of course, of catering to the less at-risk population. But also, whether it is in the narratives of having put it behind us or still being in it, the focus of COVID-19 narratives seems to always be on an 'us' that centralises Europe and, less often, other rich and powerful countries. It is often treated as a regional, if not a national, issue. The same attitude appears in reflections on the humanitarian aspects of the Russian state's invasion of Ukraine (which is horrible). It seems that because this war is "close" or is assumed to be a threat to us – the same us, recurring – do we care to treat refugees and survivors with dignity and respect.

Haraway's passage on the future that you quoted reminded me of Ghassan Hage's (2003) formulation of hope. I like this formulation of hope, not because we have to hold on to it, but because I think it is possible to maintain it while staying with the trouble. His formulation goes against the goal-oriented articulation of hope. Hage has theorised hope in his critique of neoliberal societies, in which subjects can be hopeful and, through hope, think of better futures or become hopeless and not be able to imagine their futures. Echoing Rebecca Coleman and Debra Ferreday (2010) hope should not always be considered a progression to a utopian future where we avoid past troubling experiences; it can entail a temporality that does not necessarily entail optimistic futurity but instead focuses on now

and its connection to that past. This notion of hope can be mobilised to consider where we are now; after more than two years of living under a global pandemic, we are here and can still hope. Hope can be survived at this very moment.

Now that we do not have a lockdown between us – and a window of pleasant weather in Belgium and the Netherlands is appearing – we should meet in person. In fact, I am planning to travel home, and I would love to see you when I am there. Oh, and by home, I mean Belgium. It always felt like home to me when I lived there, but I feel like only now can I finally call it home after officially becoming a "citizen." I remember writing to you about the hostility of the borders. I notice the difference the official recognition of my citizenship has made. My anxieties about mobility will probably never entirely fade away, but they have been reduced.

One thing about "going back to normal" is that we can finally get close to each other. I mean that in a purely physical sense. Perhaps we can even be very radical and touch skin once we meet, lean on each other when we laugh, shake hands, or give each other a real and long hug. I *hope* we can meet soon, my friend.

Yours,

Ladan

**Notes**

1. The term "(post-)pandemic" is used here to underscore the fact that even though the "end" of the pandemic has been heralded, COVID-19 – and all the crisis situations and responses it engendered – is still very much an ongoing phenomenon.

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