

Non-representational approaches to COVID-19

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Abstract Through a performative and speculative style of writing, this chapter develops the ways in which non-representational theories might provide purchase in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. First, we present two short juxtaposing autoethnographic vignettes of our experiences of lockdown in the South of England, UK during the COVID-19 pandemic. Next, we offer some theoretical suggestions, guiding the reader through an ‘ABC’ of non-representational concepts including absent presence; affect; atmospheres; bodily knowledges; and corporeographies, before inviting them to make their own connections and think through their own experiences. The intention here is to provoke speculation, to animate in our reader new ways of making sense of their relational, non-representational experiences of the pandemic. In this way, the chapter performs some of the tenets of non-representational thinking and doing. We conclude by speculating ourselves on the ways that the pandemic has re-figured and re-constituted our own bodily boundaries and knowledges; affective and felt experiences in public spaces; and everyday encounters and routines.

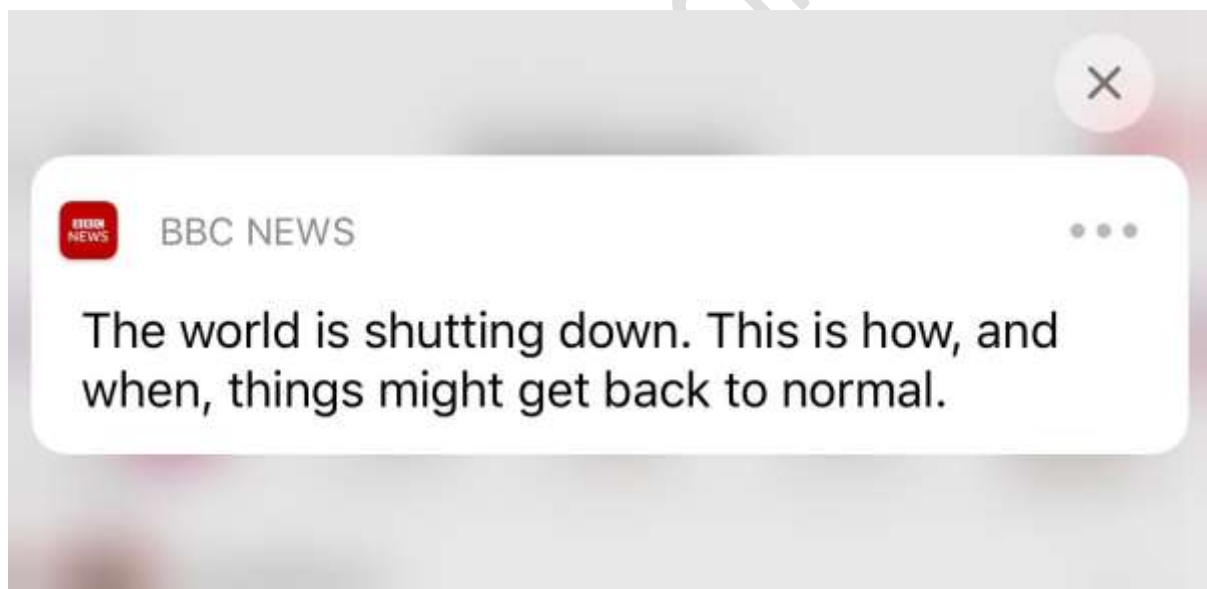


Fig. 1 BBC News Alert (author’s iPhone screenshot)

I’m sitting at my desk, trying to write. Everyone is working at home and the house feels full, noisy and overwhelming. I’m not used to this proximity with my family’s working lives. There’s an atmosphere of stress and anxiety.

Suddenly, my phone screen lights up, a notification from BBC News: ‘The world is shutting down’. A feeling of vertigo, of overwhelm. I feel surrounded and consumed by COVID and its effects: death tolls, news cycles, Twitter hot takes. It’s suffocating.

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1. Introduction

This chapter emerges through a series of autoethnographic vignettes interspersed with theoretical analysis. Together, these fragments invite speculation about the ways in which geographers might use non-representational approaches to think through the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Non-representational approaches emerged from Thrift's work on non-representational theory (NRT) in the 1990's and have had a significant impact on ways of thinking and doing in human geography. Work has been done elsewhere to map out the theoretical influences of NRT (e.g. Anderson and Harrison, 2010). To summarise, these approaches, broadly speaking, have "a *practical and processual* basis for [their] accounts of the social, the subject, and the world, one focused on the 'backgrounds', bodies and their performances" (Anderson and Harrison, 2010, p.2). They have enabled a shift in geographical thinking towards experience and refigured what 'counts' as academic knowledge. Non-representational approaches have arguably focussed more on the vital and enchanting elements of life, rather than experiences of exhaustion, grief, and decay (Philo, 2017). To respond to this, the chapter uses vignettes to explore some of the ways that the unforeseen and unchosen circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic have exposed bodily vulnerabilities.

The chapter proceeds by presenting two juxtaposing encounters experienced during the lockdown phase of the pandemic in the South of England, UK. Following this, we begin to explore an 'ABC' of non-representational concepts, inviting the reader to proceed beyond 'A', 'B' and 'C' as they make their own connections and think about their own experiences. By offering a series of "tactical suggestions" (Dewsbury et al. 2000 in Colls 2012, p.432) for action and thought, this chapter performs some of the tenets of non-representational thinking and doing. To conclude the chapter, we speculate more explicitly on how non-representational approaches might offer purchase in understanding experiences of COVID-19.

2. Vignettes

Encounter 1: Gemma

There are signs and posters plastered everywhere, shouting the new rules in bold print. I feel a faint buzzing sensation behind my eyes, my ears, a slow-build fog of COVID-19 weighing heavily on my limbs. I walk, slightly dazed, towards the 'hand-sanitizing station' jumping suddenly to the side to keep the two-metre distance as a man emerges from the aisle to my left. He looks startled, but then smiles and thanks me. I smile back and our eyes meet. As we hold eye contact for a fraction longer than usual, I feel the weight of his 'thanks', that one tiny word that spoke volumes, yet left so much unsaid. One word that spoke to our connectedness, to our mutual imbrication in this experience, our shared responsibility. In that moment, he and I were 'in it together', protecting each other, doing our best. It broke my heart a little.

I lower my eyes, the feeling of my hands (those potentially deadly, infection carrying hands) dangling limply by my side, waiting for him to pass. Then I resume my mission. What do I need? Pasta. Ok. Empty shelves...

Encounter 2: Chloe

I'm standing in the queue for a local supermarket. I notice a bouncer outside the store controlling the crowd. Other attendants are disinfecting trolleys and monitoring the line of people waiting to enter the store. It's hot, and I'm getting a headache; my eyes squint in the sunlight. In front of me a man is talking *at* other shoppers, waving his arms in the air. I'm curious. No one else is talking, everyone is silent. They are all ignoring this man. He turns around to me and comments loudly: "queueing like this is ridiculous!". I'm taken aback. I reply; "it's a pain, but it's necessary at the moment, isn't it?". He scoffs, and shouts; "the virus isn't real, it's all a hoax! The government wants to control us!". Anger swells; I think of the death tolls and friends who have lost family members. I angrily retort back and he interrupts, asking me for proof that the virus is real. Others in the queue tell him to be quiet: "no one wants to talk about this here". He enters the shop, whilst arguing with the staff.

I do my shopping, feeling rattled and unsure - I don't want to meet this man again. The headache is getting stronger, and my vision is blurry. I finish my shop, pushing my heavy trolley out of the store. The shop attendant stops me, asks me if I'm alright. I tell her I'm fine, but my voice is thick and wavers. I feel drained.

3. Suggestions/openings

Absent presence: This signals the turn to the spectral in geography - those haunting and haunted aspects of place and experience (Wylie, 2009). Ghosts and the spectral offer "impassible" ways of understanding that are incommunicable, unexpected, or unforeseen (Madden and Adey, 2008). Spectrality extends non-representational thinking beyond the enlivened, vital and "on-goingness", to emphasise "obdurancy" and "persistence of presences that somehow remain" (ibid, p.293).

Affect: Non-representational theories are underpinned by a relational ontology. In the most basic terms, this means that nothing stands alone; while we might talk about the body, what we really mean is the body-in-relation. A variety of different conceptual mechanisms for thinking relationally have been mobilised, but the one that has taken the greatest hold, perhaps, is the idea of 'affect' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988). Attending to the affective realm enables the development of both a moment-to-moment understanding of what the body is (how it is configured through its relations to objects, other bodies, atmospheres etc.) and what emerges as a result of that configuration (the capacity of the body to act).

Atmospheres: An affective atmosphere is a kind of "moody force field" (Closs Stephens, 2016, p.183) or charged sense of "feelings circulating in the air" (ibid, p.182). Activated through assemblages of bodies, materials, and ideas, they are unpredictable, excessive, impossible to control. Regardless of attempts at "stage managing" them (ibid, p.185), their nebulous, diffuse and distributed quality can make them difficult to 'pin down'. They are, nonetheless, powerfully felt in the sensing body (McCormack, 2008).

Bodily knowledges: Non-representational approaches have reframed the body as knowledgeable in itself, meaning that bodily registers (e.g. the non-cognitive, the sensual, the felt etc.) are seen to be significant, and are brought into our academic understandings. Rather than being unknowledgeable and insignificant (relegated contra the mind in Cartesian understandings) or made as a rather passive, socially determined object (in some accounts of embodiment), the body instead becomes refigured as active in, and central to, how we live in the world (Dewsbury, 2000).

Corporeogeographies: Bodies are "fluid, volatile, messy, leaky" (Longhurst, 2001, p.11). Geographies of the body, or corporeogeographies, have challenged the masculinist, ableist, clean and coherent notions of the body as airtight and complete (ibid). Corporeogeographies name the messy, turbulent, leaky and porous elements of the body: farting, bleeding, urinating, and giving birth, to name a few. Here, all bodies are revealed to be "monstrous" (Colls, 2006), a term which signals the vulnerability and instability of *all* corporeal experience.

4. Summary and conclusion

COVID-19 is invisible, yet it is ever present, haunting the public sphere. It exists in a relation of "absent presence", becoming "constitutive of the entire experience" (Wylie, 2009, p.282), as public spaces become 'danger-zones' where Government mandates and 'lock-down' orders are a constant, looming presence. In the street and the supermarket we see usual sights, sounds, navigate familiar places, but they reverberate with a charge; a kind of palpable, yet intangible, vibration in the air that envelops us, radiates upon, through and between us with a contagious quality, like the virus itself. The felt sense of this 'danger-zone' and experience of the disease weighs us down, making us feel slow and deliberate. Our habits, interactions, and reactions are re-moulded through new supermarket layouts, posters, signs, and sanitizing stations. Here, the knowledgeable body becomes more apparent. We learn to navigate life in lockdown. The regularly changing situation reconfigures rules on travel, proximity, and meeting

up on a weekly basis. The body is forced to continually renegotiate its relation to the world - how it moves, senses and feels.

These choreographies are performed by a leaky and vulnerable body. The absent present nature of COVID-19 unsettles our assumption of our complete and bounded corporeality. The body is re-constituted as a vector of coronavirus, as we realise that we are all susceptible to the disease. This leaky, vulnerable body is radically open to affect and be affected. It is reconfigured through our encounters with others. Encounter here means meeting, but a meeting that involves surprise and conflict (Ahmed, 2000). We are affected by the encounter because we are always already vulnerable, and open to what arrives from the outside.

Offering understandings of the world through an encounter (such as the two presented here) has become one key way in which geographers drawing on NRT have presented their research. Presenting these encounters relies on the researcher using their own body “directly in the field as a recording machine itself” (Dewsbury 2010, p.8), and involves attuning to “often overlooked or ignored minor details” (Ash and Gallacher 2015, p.82), which might act as “lightning rods for thought” (Dewsbury 2010, p.8). The structure of this chapter has modelled how this might happen; presenting 2 encounters and then 5 concepts that might prove productive in relation to COVID-19.

Such encounters matter. They are significant to our felt sense of the world and our resultant becomings. They interrupt our habitual ways of moving, sensing, and feeling; producing a ‘new normal’. Beginning at the start of the alphabet, the chapter has offered a set of speculations on the way that the pandemic has re-figured and re-constituted our bodily boundaries and knowledges; affective and felt experiences in public spaces; and everyday encounters and routines. As an opening to the reader, we issue an invitation to join us in developing a non-representational style of thinking about COVID-19 and its impacts through the form and structure of the alphabet.

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