

Excursions

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Reflecting About Chaos

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Confusion, Turmoil, Disruption: Reflecting About “Research in Times of Chaos”

(Issue 10.1, Chaos, 2020)

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Managing Editor – Issue 10.1 Chaos

Chaos: confusion, turmoil, disruption. It was our hope that the tenth issue of *Excursions* would shed light on the confusion of environmental and social disasters, the turmoil of economic and political crisis, and the disruption of violent and unceasing conflicts. We wanted to take a closer look at the chaotic state of the world.

It turns out 2020 had plans of its own. As the Covid-19 pandemic spread, confusion took over the world, almost everyone saw their lives in turmoil, and disruption was just another Tuesday. Confusion, turmoil, disruption... even more chaos.

Nevertheless, to quote Sun Tzu, “in the midst of chaos, there is also opportunity”. The opportunity that the pandemic presented to *Excursions* was the chance to not only examine and analyse chaos, but also to document it as it was happening in a global scale. So, we asked doctoral researchers to tell us what it is like to do research during a pandemic – or, in other words, what it is like to do *Research in Times of Chaos*.

Covid-19 has brought with it a new way to live – and to do research. In this new and unexpectedly chaotic world, we were invited to reinvent, rethink and readapt constantly. *Excursions* is devoting its next issue to chaos, and we are looking to explore all aspects of it, including what it means for research and researchers. How did the chaos of Covid-19

affect your life as a doctoral researcher, your research, your ability to do research? What changes have you had to make to keep your research going? How did you navigate the chaos?¹

In a first for *Excursions*, we created a special section within our main thematic issue and, alongside eight articles exploring chaos from different academic angles, we innovated by also publishing eight essays. This was a space to address the pandemic head-first: doctoral researchers could express themselves and talk about the chaos they were experiencing – whether it was from the outside in or the inside out. In *Reflections*, I chose to reflect on and re-print three that I find particularly relatable.

First, confusion. Heidi Cobham details how her PhD life changed when the pandemic hit intensely and unexpectedly. Reading her essay brings back the chaotic feelings of the first lockdown and all the ways we – individually and collectively – had to adapt to the new normal that was imposed when we suddenly had to move our entire lives online. Just like her, I’m also expecting two degrees.

Then, turmoil. Matt Smith captures the difficulty of focusing and writing during the pandemic. His thought process is part of the essay and an impeccable reflection of how challenging it was to simply stop and think – which I undeniably shared. His “Pause – Breath – Sight” and “Pause – Think – Feel” rhythm echoed in my mind and my own writing struggles.

And finally, disruption. Aizuddin Mohamed Anuar paints a picture of what the world looked like two months in. As our (often-times, multi-continental) lives were confined to four walls amongst pleas to stay at home, he describes how his fieldwork was disrupted. Through this essay, the author learns alongside his audience that the best way to deal with disruption of this caliber is often to not rush into trouble-shooting mode. Patience is a virtue –

¹ This is the Call for Essays for the special section Research in Times of Chaos, which was part of *Excursions*’ issue 10.1 “Chaos”. The Call for Essays was published on the *Excursions* website (available at <https://excursions-journal.sussex.ac.uk/>), advertised on social media and sent out on emails.

in life and in research – even when it feels like you are just reliving the same day over and over again.

Confusion, turmoil, disruption... snapshots of chaos. These essays show different sides of the pandemic, but all three of them showcase the resilience of Doctoral Researchers. The fact that we have not given up in the middle of the Covid-19 chaos, when we have had to adapt to sudden changes, could not focus, and had our research abruptly interrupted, is a testament to our strength, even if some days it might not have felt like progress, or we did not feel up to the task.

Confusion, turmoil, disruption... chaos, yes, but as we embrace chaos, we also find resilience, motivation, creativity, humanity. In issue 10.1 of *Excursions*, we fully embraced chaos. We looked at chaos as an opposition of order, as fuel to a new order and to creativity, and as part of doing research. All of this (and more) is clear in the essays reprinted here. And, just like these authors – as well as you, reader, I am certain –, I am proud that *Excursions* found a way to be resilient and innovate in the year of chaos.

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Chaotic Chaos and the Researching Researcher

As published in Issue 10.1, Chaos, 2020

(*Research in Time of Chaos*)

Heidi Cobham

Life as a PhD philosophy researcher is, invariably, chaotic. Days consist of reading and *re-reading* my thesis, interpreting journal articles and book chapters, meeting with my supervisors, preparing a conference paper, attending a workshop and preparing next week's lesson for my class of twenty-six undergraduate students. Time seeps through my fingers and sleep has become but a vague memory.

Then Covid-19 happened, *abruptly*.

Covid-19 forced a standstill, a shutdown to life as we know it and a lockdown. All physical plans had to be converted into virtual plans; life became more digital than ever before. We were separated but had to look for innovative ways to stay connected. We were alone but had to find ways to be together. We were forced to pause, to be still, to stay home and not engage in the usual chaotic hustle and bustle to which we were all so accustomed.

“Lockdown” promised us safety and stillness, the underlying implication being that with more time at home we would have more time on our hands. Yet, this could not be further from the truth, especially for a researcher. Reading and *re-reading* my thesis now meant reading and *re-reading* an unprecedented number of emails about changes caused by Covid-19. I could no longer read journal articles and book chapters at what had

become my second home, the library, and had to resort to online versions and, where not available, purchase a copy. Supervisory meetings now had an additional member: either Skype or Zoom. Preparing for the conference meant also preparing to pre-record and upload my presentation. Workshops were now over the internet and no longer over a cup of coffee. Preparing next week's lesson meant that I became somewhat of a student who was learning how to teach online. On top of this, Covid-19 brought with it a wealth of confusion and a lack of clarity. Keeping up to date with the changing information and better understanding Covid-19 required research of its own.

The strength and energy required to navigate this new-found chaos was equivalent to embarking on an additional PhD degree. The chaos was mentally draining. I think it is safe to say that I am now a PhD researcher of philosophy... *and* a PhD researcher of Covid-19, so I'm awaiting two degrees.

Heidi Cobham is a Doctoral Researcher at the University of Sussex, United Kingdom.

Disruptive Notes¹

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(*Research in Time of Chaos*)

Matt C. Smith

I was going to start this reflective piece on affective atmospheres by talking about chaos, disruption and the absurd, but the academic part of me wants to define and quantify what chaos and disruption is and so what may be particular about the disruption caused by Covid-19.

I have a section of my research diary titled “Disruption Notes” where I log what the disruption to my research has been (as requested by the funders), in particular how my data collection has been halted, delayed, mutated, but also the conditions of working from home. In this, I have included the bass from the flat below vibrating through my feet, or the door slamming and arguments that climaxed with the police being called one evening and the man from the flat downstairs being arrested.

[Pause]

[Breathe]

[Sigh]

The prevalence and increase in domestic violence during the Covid pandemic needs more serious treatment than my reflexive writing can grant it.

¹ This piece was originally written during an online writing workshop held by the Centre for Transforming Sexuality and Gender at the University of Brighton.

I feel and see this inability of academic writing to treat violence with the feeling it deserves when reading journal articles where trans lives, but more often trans deaths, more precisely murders, are used to make points. There needs to be more humane treatment of people's lives than what academic writing can or usually affords them. As Talia Mae Bettcher (2007) has written "Dare we forget the sheer value of one human life that is lost? And can we bring about the changes that are needed within so that we may undo the distortions that blind us to this?" (p. 60)

There is perhaps no way to give the time and recognition deserved but if you are using trans lives and deaths to make theoretical points (don't), then more compassion, recognition and feeling is needed. The cold voice of academia can send a shiver down my spine when objectivity comes before care. I do not know how to do this but giving time for the reader to feel and properly think may be a start.

Propinquity to domestic violence is affective. It is disruptive and chaotic.

[Pause]

[Think]

[Feel]

This wasn't what I intended to write – what did I come here to accomplish? I need to retread my steps and refocus.

[Pause]

[Empty Stage]

[Find focus]

[Arrive back on stage with a chair]

The absurdist ontology I am using in my research seems particularly pertinent with being able to comprehend the chaotic context this research is

taking place in. Perhaps chaos is too strong and ‘research-as-mess’ fits better. It has precedent (Cook, 2009; Law, 2004), resonates with the absurdist ontology and facilitates the integration of the work of Anderson (2009) on affective atmospheres that has been applied to planning theory and practice by Buser (2014; 2016). Anderson’s use of

[Door slams in the flat beneath]

[Thunder of vibrations through my chair]

Anderson’s...

[LOUDER, find focus]

Anderson’s work builds on Deleuze’s reading and reworking of Spinoza...

Matt C Smith is a Doctoral Researcher at the University of Sussex, United Kingdom.

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Staying with the (Research) Trouble

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(*Research in Time of Chaos*)

Aizuddin Mohamed Anuar

There are times when I feel like I am reliving the same day over and over. At my family home in the interior of Peninsular Malaysia, I pace indoors, coated by the punishing midday heat. Observing lockdown for more than two months now – my PhD fieldwork at a rural school 4 hours away disrupted – I am slowly forgetting the contours of life beyond this house.

I attempt to engage in the life of the mind somehow amidst the chaos. The writing of fieldnotes continue, however sparse and ambivalent they may be in this time (am I technically in the field?). Slowly, through challenging and hazy days of writing, draft manuscripts for a journal article and book chapter are birthed. This PhD continues, I convince myself, even when I do not feel up for it on certain days, lying motionless in bed, even when progress appears glacial, even when it seems like such an inconsequential project when the world seems to collapse...

Over these past months, I have reluctantly revised my application for institutional ethical clearance to transfer data collection into the online realm. But I am learning that to pause at this moment, to not rush into troubleshooting, to hold space for how my informants are adjusting to the circumstances of lockdown, is an act of care, an ethics transcending bureaucracy. I choose to wait things out, “staying with the trouble” in the

words of Donna Haraway. In retrospect and introspect, I allowed myself time to mourn the loss of my original research design and all the aspirations infused therein. No doubt the pandemic disrupts the currents of the field, altering the course of work within it. How can it not? A friend and fellow PhD student, M, assuages me: “It is time to have patience and tranquillity, as our research is not disconnected to social flows... and that includes this pandemic.”

I enact the tentative act of hoping as part of research. The dust will settle eventually, the world remade anew. Recently, Mr. Y who sits next to me in the teachers’ room, who generously shares bread and stories with me, called to inform me that my car tyres have gone flat due to immobility. In mid-March, assuming I would return after the one-week school break, I had left the car (borrowed from my mother) and other possessions at the site. This was before lockdown became the norm; one week has stretched into ten, and counting. Despite the circumstances, relations and objects tether me, however tenuously, to the field — I latch on tightly like a child. This gives me hope of returning there eventually, even if only to say goodbye to all the informants who have taught me so much in the course of this research. At the time of writing, the Malaysian government has announced that schools will begin to reopen in two weeks. Hope, I remind myself, again and again, hope!

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