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Material methods for a rapid-response anthropology

Sudden crises frustrate anthropological methodologies. Our discipline aspires to engaged scholarship in dialogue with community and public concerns. Yet timely social analysis must address the ephemeral and unpredictable, running against the rhythm of anthropological fieldwork and publication. When social distancing precludes typical ethnographic engagements, how may we adapt anthropological approaches?

A mixed-methods anthropology rooted in material culture and spatial analysis is well suited to analyse rapidly unfolding events, and the realisation of a socially distanced, yet ethnographically rich, fieldwork. Joining social anthropological and archaeological approaches to the contemporary world (e.g. De León 2015; Magnani and Magnani 2018) allows us to develop a rapid-response anthropology.

The Arctic city of Tromsø (N. Sámi: *Romssa*) reported the first case of COVID-19 in Norway on 26 February 2020. In mid-March, the government announced the closing of universities, schools, theatres and many businesses, and cancelled organised cultural and sports gatherings. Unlike countries that imposed the strictest isolation measures, the Norwegian state permitted individuals to move freely and visit shops, but advised to maintain personal distance and limit gathering size. In the relative calm before the restrictions, we methodically inventoried fully-stocked grocery stores as we learned of emptying supermarkets elsewhere in the world. After the national announcement, we adapted our anthropological practice to maximise social distancing according to guidelines, maintaining structured observation as we established new routines. The materials and spaces we documented not only mapped the possibilities and constrictions of life in a pandemic in Tromsø, but the political regulations that shaped our research practice.

We recorded local variations of international stockpiling behaviours during our reduced shopping trips: in addition to the expected overconsumption of toilet paper, rice and flour seen in other countries, Tromsø residents stocked up on canned mackerel, bread crackers and pre-made pizza sandwiches in bulk. When spring thaws began in early April, we mapped the density of discarded plastic gloves appearing in the melting snow (see Figure 1), and the take-out receipts that traced shifting consumption away from the centre of the city.

Rather than focusing on photographs of bare supermarket shelves or public squares, we followed transformations in consumption and social gathering that suggested a dialogic relationship between top-down regulation and everyday practice. Initial observations of depleting stock and signs on shuttered businesses revealed a surface aspiration to socially distanced practice and national solidarity. Less than two weeks later, as the panic subsided and supermarket shelves had long been replenished,

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Figure 1 Discarded glove found in spring snowmelt on Storgata, Tromsø city centre, 8 April 2020

the crowding of some grocery stores and park trails showed that gathering had not disappeared but had merely shifted to new locations. While people changed their behaviour to accommodate national mandates and global information, they also created new possibilities for interaction.

What impacts will this pandemic have on anthropological practice, and how will the discipline contribute to its reflections? If we are to establish anthropological perspectives as key tools in thinking through current events – whether restricted to home or permitted to move about more socially distanced – we must develop field methods for a rapid-response anthropology.

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NICOLETTE MAKOVICKY

The national(ist) necropolitics of masks

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, the science of masks has become hotly debated by epidemiologists, public health officials and the public at large. An icon of rational hygienic modernity, the epidemic has made face masks key to the production of contemporary necro-politics, alongside practices of containment, surveillance and quarantine. Surgical masks and N95 respirators are the subject of international diplomacy and geopolitical tussles; consignments of masks are being diverted or impounded in transit as governments panic-buy protective gear for their strained medical systems. The positive effects of masking the general public remain contested. The World Health Organization advises that masks only be used by healthcare professionals, caretakers and the sick. Rejecting this risk-based approach, public authorities in Singapore, South Korea, Turkey and the USA recommend citizens to cover their mouth and nose in public. In Europe, masks are mandatory alongside other social distancing measures in Austria, Poland and the Czech and Slovak Republics.

As visible signifiers of disease, masks may in certain situations lead to the stigmatisation of their wearers. In other cultural contexts, wearing a mask is perceived as part of responsible citizenship and social etiquette. Some European politicians have sought to exploit such positive associations to invoke a sense of solidarity and civic duty among their citizens. In Slovakia, President Zuzanna Čaputová attends official events wearing colourful cloth masks, while Prime Minister Igor Matovič briefs the press in white masks decorated with a small Slovak flag. Such deliberate efforts to present masks as fashionable – and fashionably patriotic – hints at the current necro-political logics of masking. Marking out practices of masking as part of a wider moral imperative to protect the greater good, this logic also defines the content and boundaries of this greater good in the form of the national body politic.

Masks are boundary objects, mediating between ideas of contamination and containment, purity and pollutions, and life and death. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, however, they perform a new kind of boundary work: they demarcate and negotiate

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