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Donner forme à la COVID-19

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Article abstract

In the spring of 2020, the novel Coronavirus upended life in New Jersey, US, precipitating an unprecedented state lockdown of 9 million residents. The essay reflects on the author's experience of the lockdown and her relationship to a Syrian refugee woman resettled nearby. The author identifies their shared experiences staying at home and prioritizing the collective good in the midst of a pandemic.

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Staying at Home

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Abstract: In the spring of 2020, the novel Coronavirus upended life in New Jersey, US, precipitating an unprecedented state lockdown of 9 million residents. The essay reflects on the author's experience of the lockdown and her relationship to a Syrian refugee woman resettled nearby. The author identifies their shared experiences staying at home and prioritizing the collective good in the midst of a pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19; refugees; engaged anthropology; feminist anthropology; pandemic

Résumé: Au printemps 2020, le nouveau Coronavirus a bouleversé la vie des 9 millions d'habitants du New Jersey, aux États-Unis, entraînant un confinement sans précédent à l'échelle de l'État. L'article se penche sur la façon dont l'auteure a vécu le confinement et sur la relation qu'elle a entretenue avec une réfugiée syrienne réinstallée à proximité. Il traite de leurs expériences communes de séjour à la maison et de priorisation du bien commun en pleine pandémie.

Mots-clés: COVID-19; réfugiés; anthropologie engagée; anthropologie féministe; pandémie

In early March, when the ground had just started to thaw, I transplanted mint shoots from my garden into small pots to share with Noor¹. I knew these little herbs would flourish under her watchful care. She would pinch mint leaves to brighten the platters of tabbouleh and fattoush salads she prepares for her family, or to sweeten a pot of afternoon tea. When she gathers with other Syrian and Iraqi friends over small porcelain cups of strong coffee, gossip, and camaraderie, the little pots of mint will circulate through this tight network of women. But when New Jersey's Governor Phil Murphy ordered the state to lockdown on March 22, all life ground to a halt and Noor's mint stalled on my back stoop. To stop the spread of the novel coronavirus, Governor Murphy

ordered the nine million residents of our state to stay at home except for necessary travel, and ordered all non-essential businesses closed. We were permitted to leave the house for essential needs, such as groceries, food or medicine, to visit close family members, or visit a doctor. We could go on a walk or exercise outside, but otherwise, we were instructed to stay at home.



Supermarkets sacked, March 2020. Photo by author.

The stay at home order was a startling imposition on a way of living, moving, and thinking. Northern New Jersey is more accurately described as metropolitan rather than suburban, part of a dynamic system of commerce, exchange and interaction with New York, a global city. Indeed, the fast pace of life in New Jersey relies on unfettered movement. From the earliest hours of the morning there are cars, foot traffic, dogs being walked, bicycles, strollers, and coffee to go. The train whistle in the valley echoes throughout our town as a reminder of the daily movement of people and activity between our town and New York,

and all the subsidiary activity that emanates from that urban core. It is precisely because of New Jersey's dynamic, global character that I have come to know Noor and several dozen Syrian and Iraqi families who were resettled from their war-torn homes to apartments several miles from me near one of the busiest ports in the world, the Port Newark-Elizabeth Marine Terminal. Now our metropolitan life and its movement and vitality have been suspended.

The spring was surreal in its stillness. In these earliest months of the pandemic, the public seemed shocked into compliance. After the panicked sacking of supermarkets, people retreated inward, struggling to create new routines and patterns when normalcy has been upended. Once congested roadways were now empty, and public spaces were desolate. In the academy, there was some talk about stalled projects and suspended research as flights were grounded, national borders sealed, conferences cancelled, and libraries and other university facilities closed. This chatter seemed disconnected from an enveloping anxiety, sometimes verging on panic, that surrounded and gripped me. Concerns about foreign travel



Customers line up six feet apart, waiting to be admitted to a supermarket. Stores were operating under a reduced capacity to limit the potential spread of the coronavirus. Photo by author.

didn't engage me as my own research shifted years ago from a more traditional, long-distance model to one anchored in my own community and the global issues and problems that spilled onto my own doorstep. My daily efforts revolved around securing supplies, preparing food, cleaning surfaces obsessively, and checking up on my elderly parents and children in other states. I spent many hours in webinars and online training classes, figuring out how to suddenly shift my classes online.

By the beginning of April, area hospitals were overwhelmed. People were sick and there were no testing kits available. Cars and ambulances queued up at emergency rooms, waiting to discharge new patients, and there were tents set up in hospital parking lots. Masked people wrapped in blankets waited in lines to be admitted. There was no personal protective equipment (PPE) for frontline health workers: doctors and nurses were wearing garbage bags and relying on donations of hand sewn cotton masks. In my neighborhood, an ad hoc collective of neighbors started tearing up bedsheets and men's dress shirts to stitch together face coverings for hospital staff. The Mayor issued a daily email announcing the number of new cases in our town, the day's death tally, and, more optimistically, recoveries from the Coronavirus. My friend's 99-year-old mother, miraculously, survived. My neighbor's 50-year-old husband, father of two small children, died.

Our job was to stay put. Save lives, stay at home, we were admonished.

"I wish you and your family the safety of god," Noor texted me when I inquired about her family's health and safety. "Don't worry sister, we are all fine. We are always at home."

I met Noor five years ago through volunteer work and activism. In 2015, millions of refugees from war and privation pressed across Europe. Borders hardened, pushing people into the sea. The US increasingly seemed to abandon its identity as a haven of refuge: then New Jersey governor, Chris Christie, cynically positioning himself for a presidential run, pronounced that New Jersey would not admit a single refugee from war-torn Syria, not even an orphan under the age of five. For me, at that moment, to be an anthropologist meant that I needed first and foremost to engage in the world around me and to "confront" in the words of former American Anthropological Association President Alisse Waterson "the radical evil" of our time (quoted in Thomas 2019). I learned that despite Chris Christie's grandstanding, the federal government, which actually controls refugee resettlement, had permitted a limited number of Syrian

refugees into the US, and several dozen families were relocated several miles from my home in New Jersey. Although I knew little about Syria and spoke no Arabic, I joined with Muslim volunteers to welcome these families, rejecting our governor's hateful rhetoric.

In joining these outreach efforts, I followed the trajectory of many feminist activist anthropologists who have long challenged the artificial distinction between theory and experience in our discipline, who have prioritized addressing pressing social problems and social justice issues over more apolitical positivist knowledge seeking (Bookman and Morgen 1988; Craven and Davis 2013; D'Amico-Samuels 2010; Harrison 2008; Lamphere 2016; Morgen 2002; Mullings 1997; Sacks 1988a; 1988b; Susser 1982, 2009). I engaged anthropology's antiracist traditions (Mullings 2005) in an effort to actively reject xenophobia in my own homeland. As a Latin Americanist, I had some familiarity with the violence of displacement (De Leon and Wells 2005; Heidbrink 2019; Manz 2005; Oliver-Smith 2010), the power of transnational migrant connections (Berg 2015; Duany 2011; Schiller and Fouron 2001; Jonas and Rodríguez 2015; Kyle 2000; Levitt 2001; Pedersen 2013) the stigma of a refugee identity, and power of human creativity to reassemble a dignified life in exile (Besteman 2016; Kovic 2005; Montejo 1999). I found myself, however, drawing less on my theoretical tool kit, and more on the practical capacities I had developed over decades of fieldwork, travel, and leading study abroad programs when I learned to pay attention, to listen, to communicate across barriers of language and culture, to slow down, to lead with empathy, to become comfortable with my own difference.

I bonded with Noor over our shared love of plants, birds, and gardening. As I have come to know her and her family, I have enjoyed elaborate feasts at her table, and shared with her many cups of tea and plates of small pastries and sweets. While acknowledging significant power differences between us — she, a rural woman with an 8th grade education, displaced from her home and country, I, a university professor in my homeland, with a house, a job and support from family and friends — I also note my lack of cultural, linguistic and academic expertise about Syria as a leveling factor in our relationship. She texts me long messages in Arabic that I scramble to decipher with several Smartphone apps. I downloaded WhatsApp so I could receive her flurries of emojis and memes of roses and coffee, an extension of the hospitality she provides at her table. She laughs uproariously at my stilted efforts to imitate her fluid dance moves. She awes me with her ability to cook for five, 10 or 20 people at the drop of a hat — multiple dishes of chopped vegetables, homemade

pickles, pyramids of lamb and rice garnished with spirals of radishes and starbursts of parsley. Now I worried about Noor and the other resettled refugee families who fled war and violence in the Middle East, and endured hardship, insecurity and deprivation in refugee camps, only to arrive in the US and discover that their haven was the epicenter of a global pandemic.

Throughout the spring, I relieved anxiety through work outside in my garden, but Noor, who lives in a townhouse without a yard, had not left her home. By mid-April, when Ramadan began in isolation, with no communal prayers, no gathering to break the fast with family and friends, Noor confessed frustration. “This virus is very annoying,” she lamented. Because she and I share a love of flowers and nature, she reflected on her lost spring: “We did not enjoy the beauty of nature. I am sad for this.” I learned that she had not set foot outside her townhouse in ten weeks, despite the fact that there are tree-lined streets right beyond her home, with wide sidewalks and few people. “Perhaps you can walk around the neighborhood,” I coaxed her. “It’s probably okay, especially if you wear a mask.”

“I’m afraid to go out for the sake of my kids,” she responded.

Her comment caught my attention. It was the elderly, not the children who were being hardest hit by this pandemic. Hospital staff and essential workers, likewise, were jeopardized by exposure. At this point, however, in the spring of 2020, there were few if any cases of children with the virus. The public was being cautioned to stay at home to protect our elders and our workers, to stay well so that we didn’t burden our already strained health care system.

I understood that the pandemic and lockdown had encouraged Noor to double down on her role as a homemaker and the mother of young children. I had learned that in the rural part of Syria where she originates, women leave school early, marry young, and have large families. The daily rhythm of life is defined by shared meals and family gatherings, the call to prayer, and cycles of religious festivals. Women take pride in their homes and with being at home. I know one Syrian woman who boasted that before the war, she never left her home, not even to go grocery shopping. If she needed anything, her husband would arrange for its delivery. This was a sign of status and a badge of pride.

As I have come to know Noor and a number of other Syrian and Iraqi women displaced by war and relocated arbitrarily to a new home where they have no common language, religion, or social ties, I have seen the way the rules and rituals of Islam create calmness, order, and continuity. The hijab, the smartphones that

echo the call to prayer, signal a connection to life back home, and membership in a faith community in a new land. Noor was primed towards the highest degree of compliance with Governor Murphy's order because staying home, tending to children and family, was, for her, already a revered value.

This devotion to the home, and veiling outside of it, is too often interpreted in the west as a form of backwardness and oppression. While the veil in its various forms — whether a hijab such as Noor wears, or a burqa or chador — allows Muslim women to move comfortably from a segregated, domestic, women's sphere into public space where men and women mingle, in western eyes veiling is seen mainly as a form of subjugation. Yet, as Papanek (1982) noted during her work in Pakistan, veiling can function as a form of “portable seclusion,” an adaptation that allows women to move discreetly and respectfully in public space, thus enhancing their autonomy (cited in Abu-Lughod 2002). Abu-Lughod notes that veiling, while differing in form and degree in the diverse places where it is adopted, everywhere signifies belonging to a particular community and participating in a moral way of life (cited in Abu-Lughod 2002).

For Noor and other resettled Muslim women I have come to know, particularly those from rural Syria, wearing a hijab is as natural as breathing, and covering one's head — an expression of religious piety, gender identity and cultural belonging — is a given. Yet for some resettled Muslim women in the community, particularly urban women from a more secular Iraq, wearing a veil is new, born out of a desire to assimilate with new pious Muslim neighbors, an expression of alliance with Islam and Muslim identity in a new land. All of these decisions are shaped within a US national context of Islamophobia, where wearing a visible expression of Islam makes Muslim women vulnerable to hatred and racist attacks. The teenage girls are often caught in the vice of these competing sentiments. The New Jersey city where they reside is populated by an African American and Latin American immigrant majority. With only a small Muslim population, some of the girls are bullied at school and harassed for wearing the hijab. With their dark hair and olive skin, Syrian and Iraqi girls can easily blend in with their Colombian and Salvadoran classmates, and several choose to reject the veil. For their mothers, however, wearing the veil carries the memories of the homes they left behind and the determination to build meaningful new lives in the US.

During this pandemic, I am appreciating yet another dimension of this religious adherence: its communal, selfless aspect. As New Jersey residents have been asked to refrain from work, travel, school, shopping, and socializing,

I have been thinking a lot about what it meant to prioritize the common good. I have been thinking about the veil as a way of balancing individual needs with respect for the interests of a larger group. In New Jersey, a capital of fast-paced consumer capitalism, seldom are individuals asked to function in deference to the larger good, or the needs of the most vulnerable. Yet as our governor ordered everyone to stay home and wear masks in public—not for our own protection, but for the protection of others — I recognized that I was being asked to behave in a way that has always been Noor’s principal consideration: to act, first and foremost, with others in mind. Whenever she dons a veil to go to the market or pick up her children at school, she signals an effort to balance the demands of home and family, adherence to an ancient faith and a religious community, and her ability to function as a modern woman in contemporary society. As New Jersey residents were asked to mask up when we left our homes to go to the pharmacy or buy food, for many of us it was a startling request by our broader community to think beyond our own needs and convenience and instead



The author with mask. Photo by author.

behave in a way that would keep others safe. We were, in effect, being asked to recognize our communal identities and participate, in Abu-Lughod's phrasing, in "a moral way of life."

By the end of May, with no end to the lockdown in sight, I resolved to drop off the little pots of mint with Noor when I was out conducting errands. I was not sure how this would work: I had never been to a Syrian home without a warm offer of hospitality. "Welcome: come in. Join us for lunch. Have a cup of coffee. Join us for tea." I was accustomed to the polite distance of men, a gentle fist to the heart and nod of greeting. From my women friends, however, there was always a flurry of kisses, a warm embrace, a physical connection. But now there was this annoying virus. We agreed that I would call her when I was coming and that I would leave the plants by her door.

When I arrived at Noor's home, she spotted me from the window and darted to the door, a black hijab covering her head and a wide smile on her open face. I've seen the hijab dash from inside the home. A knock at the door, and a woman scrambles into a spandex covering that quickly swallows a skimpier outfit for home, perhaps a low-cut t-shirt and a pair of tight blue jeans. It is a kind of instant accommodation to the unknown — will there be a man? Is it appropriate to emerge?

There was an awkward pause as I approached Noor at the threshold of her doorway. My face was covered by a cotton mask in deference to public health recommendations for halting the spread of the virus. In late May masks had not yet emerged as lightning rods in polarized political debates in the US. At first, when there were so few masks available, we were cautioned to save them for first responders. Now we were all urged to wear them at all times outside of our homes. It was a new habit, and it felt uncomfortable not to be able to signal emotions with a smile or a pantomimed kiss. These facial expressions, communicating intimacy across barriers of culture and language, had become so important to two friends who do not share a common tongue. But on that day, the mask also felt surprisingly like a shared camaraderie.

I know my life, my independence, often strike Noor as unmoored. Why am I always working, don't I have time to visit more often? So many times, when she invites me for dinner, she's disappointed when I arrive alone. Why can't your husband come? He's still working? Where are the children? They are living at school? So far away? How is your mother? Is she lonely?



Noor's daughter waters one of the plants her mother cultivated from clippings.
Photo by author.

Today she stood in the doorway of the home she had not left in ten weeks. I approached her cautiously, my face veiled in a cloth that allowed me to travel safely from my home, not mingling with others, maintaining a respectful distance. I wondered if perhaps, in her eyes, I was finally behaving appropriately, navigating the world with attentiveness and concern.

So much about Noor's life revolves around creating and maintaining home — between family and new friends in New Jersey, between her household in New Jersey and her parents and siblings displaced to Jordan, between the customs and rituals of Islam in a secular Christian majority country. Anthropology, traditionally, has disconnected itself from home and community — by traveling far away, by studying difference. Now staying resolutely at home, working online, focusing on the maintenance of my household and family, I found myself participating more fully in Noor's way of life without ever having to leave my own community.



A typical lunch the author shared with Noor.
Photo by author.

I left the mint plants several feet from her door, quickly darting back to the mandated six feet of social distance. “Wait a minute sister,” she gestured for me to come closer. I knew there was no way I could depart without hospitality: she had assembled a plastic to-go bag for me with homemade treats she prepared to celebrate the end of Ramadan’s long month of fast and prayer. I found zip-locked portions of kibbeh and pastry from her freezer and fistfuls of brightly wrapped candies. She, in turn, was delighted by the plants, which by now were fragrant and tumbling over their small pots. Mint grows prolifically and even invasively outdoors. Noor, however, planned to move these little transplants to her window sill, enveloping them in the protection and security of her home.

Noor has impressed me with her fortitude as she and her family have navigated the disruption of the pandemic. Having already survived the bombing of her home and neighborhood, the insecurity of exile and poverty in Jordan, she has become a veteran of dislocation and trauma. From her, I came to appreciate that staying at home was both a responsibility and a privilege. Noor is always

acutely aware of her parents and siblings, now stateless, trapped in deteriorating conditions in Jordan. A state mandate to turn inward, to stay put with family, safe and secure, was a bittersweet sacrifice, an opportunity to gather the strength necessary to face an uncertain future.

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Notes

¹ Pseudonym

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