What have our homes become? Metaphor and metamorphosis in the pandemic lockdown

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…*remembering the ways lifeforms have of staying alive* – Bruno Latour

1 Home, homeland

The places we call 'home' have taken on a heightened significance during the COVID-19 pandemic, both providing shelter and permitting our extended confinement. Before vaccines came along, with their still uncertain promise to release us from the necessity of such measures, the strategy for viral containment was primarily the lockdown, comprising stay-at-home orders and the forced closure of businesses and public services for all but 'essential' purposes. In lieu of an immunity proper to the body, for many people in the first period of the pandemic simply staying home served as the primary physical barrier to contagion. At the same time, home became the site of work in an unprecedented way, comprising not merely an office, but a technological platform for continuing meetings, performances and other erstwhile 'live' exchanges, alongside being a school, a quarantine facility or maybe a provider of nursing care to the very sick -- those just short of the need for hospitalisation. Home-school, hospital-at-home, work-from-home: the hyphenated articulations of home have also been rough juxtapositions, clumsy and jarring schemas, provoking

questions of a wide range of practices and institutions. Tasked with multiple functions by the pandemic response, homes have been sustaining life in a time of emergency, but also inviting reflection on new modes of their inhabitation.

'Home' is also the locus of a set of powerfully normalizing and normative functions bound up with its metaphoric capability. Within a certain metaphorical register of 'home', it signals where each belongs, so that the population was aligned under lockdown with a point of origin and place of security, whether this was a private home or instead referenced the sovereign nation-state. Home, homeland. These locations and locutions form a closely imbricated pair (even if on the face of it they are opposed as private versus public domains). For home, in both these senses, is what is proper to you and can be so invoked and put to use in multiple ways. Consider only the discursive power attending the very idea of a place of return and thus origin, freighted with the weight of security, of being a safe haven in a heartless world. There is *no place like home*; home is *where the heart is*. Yet due to this singular and intimate propriety, home may readily become a forced destination, as we have seen in the pandemic. The imaginary of home as a place of belonging, but also a place of exclusion, possessing borders that can be secured, has been activated at multiple levels by the experience of crisis. Among the many effects lockdown has had, the invigoration of a metaphorical trajectory of propriety, exclusion, containment and security, with strongly patriarchal resonances, forms a striking foundation of the pandemic response. In this respect, homes are *proper* to us in ways that frame how we speak of our points of origin, our returns and thus our everyday orientation.

Consider my home, Australia. Australian citizens were not allowed to leave their nation for well over a year. For long periods they were not only locked down but either locked in or locked out, by closed borders. At certain times of heightened alarm, a suspension of the right to return applied (and applied especially stringently to the Australian population of Indian descent (Guardian 2021)); while at other times, hefty quarantine costs and lack of opportunities blocked re-entry, if citizens

wished to return from abroad. In April 2020, the Department of Home Affairs – for so we name the Department responsible for managing the nation's borders - issued the injunction to certain unwelcome 'foreign' bodies to 'go home'. International students, despite having previously been a highly sought-after source of revenue for universities, and moreover invaluable contributors of labour as well as consumers in the economy, were brusquely given the message that they could not expect to be cared for if they stayed on (ABC 2020). This was not their proper 'home', even if, for many it was nigh impossible to leave. The forms of relationality conferred by common inhabitation, which shape other connotations of the home and its mutual responsibilities, appeared readily over-shadowed by a sovereign right to exclusion. In a notably immunitary response, those who were welcome a year earlier were suddenly 'alien' now, allowing home as 'origin and identity' to trump other more hospitable possibilities.

Insisting on the state as a homeland can have extreme consequences. It can, for instance, generate a type of absolute homelessness for people who, as Hannah Arendt long ago observed, become victims of the desperate paradoxes of a world partitioned into nation-states, capable only of belonging *nowhere*, with nowhere their lives would be recognised as part of shared human existence. The crisis of state homelessness led her to call for a new 'law on earth', a 'right to rights', for homelessness on her account *is* rightlessness (1973: 277-279). The idea of 'home' then, is never far from both citizenship and the long-established exertions of sovereignty which in these times received new impetus, forming an uneasy balance between rights and protections. Perhaps operationalising a familiar old rhetoric of 'sovereign borders' has fulfilled more than purely practical objectives, giving reassurance of somehow being in control, of deciding (just like the private home owner) who may enter, and who must leave. In this way patterns of state thinking and modes of control could become all the more entrenched by the crisis.

Yet the use made of the home, especially in the early phases of the pandemic as a primary mode of response to a situation of emergency,

has also called forth new responses in thinking. The work that home has been doing during the pandemic lies not only in offering practical shelter, containment and nurture, but ways of *making sense* that respond to times of upheaval, emergency and danger in innovative idioms as well as in more conservative ones. 'Home', a place at once so personal, and yet so fundamental to the expectations and boundaries of life lived in common, is surely one of the 'metaphors we live by' (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003). In structuring how we think, speak and act, its figurative work is normally quite invisible, quietly managing expectations and eliding trouble. At certain times, however -- and now is one such time -- the trouble surfaces, relationships come into view, and meanings overflow. If 'home' is a metaphor that is working particularly hard in lockdown, this is attributable not simply to its semantic richness but to the freshly blurred boundaries between the public and the private, work and family life.

To consider home as a metaphor is to acknowledge its symbolic and indeed disruptive work beyond the merely instrumental role it has played during lockdown. The nature of homes that can be owned, but also requisitioned for other uses, have challenged existing or assumed conceptualisations. A host of senses given to 'home' by philosophers, artists and political theorists writing in the wake of the pandemic, invite us to ponder the implications of what this site of dwelling might become, in the wake of a period that has been lived on terms of emergency and taking orientation from the challenge of conceptualising new modes of inhabitation apt to the strange experiences we have so recently undergone. To canvas something of the range of instances, further discussed below: Did lockdowns, manifesting the biopolitics of the modern state centred on the life of the *oikos* (home/economy, the site of preservation of 'mere life') make the state of exception normal, 'at home' among us, as Giorgio Agamben, rather infamously, lamented (2021)? Did working from home permanently transform our perceptions of what the relations of work and home might be, demanding new metaphors that extend from the realm of care into public domains, as Anuradha Vikram argues (Vikram 2020)? Or have lockdowns demonstrated not merely the metaphoric, but the

meta*morphic* capacity to force us to leave an outdated image of the 'human' world behind, to find ourselves undone as property-owners, yet re-engaged in ways of inhabiting our terrestrial homes, as Bruno Latour (2021) has recently proposed?

Before considering these divergent responses to emergency lockdowns, however, I turn to the phase of the pandemic that we seem to inhabit now (as I write in the first half of 2022 – it seems unwise at present to commit to a stable or enduring 'now'): a time of emergence from the intensity of emergency as much as emergence from staying home, when we look back, slightly dazed, and wonder what we and our worlds have become.

2 Emergence and metaphor

Re-imagining 'home' may prove important as we emerge from the most extreme period of managing the pandemic, and as an emergency reaction translates into a longer phase of politics. My interest here in the metaphoric life of 'home' under lockdown will be further shaped by a set of questions prompted by Bonnie Honig's illuminating work on the politics of exception and the state of emergency (2009). She asks: how do we *survive* emergency? What is it to 'stay alive' to the possibilities and powers revealed by emergencies, from within the constraint that an array of poor or awful choices force upon us? And linked to this, how do we narrate what has happened, in ways that do justice to the profound interruptions to our normal sense of life? Survival, as Honig uses the term here, has an extended range drawn from some of Jacques Derrida's reflections on the topic of *sur-vivance* (2004). This signals living beyond mere or bare survival, to engage with the 'more' life such survival reveals, in and as our very *emergence* from grave threat. Emergency tends to reproduce sovereignty insofar as it narrows political horizons, places a focus on the power of the state to act decisively and strips resources from longer-term public projects (Honig 2009: 9). It is all the more important, then, as Honig points out, to attend to the problem of how to survive such a desperate situation as a democratic people, an idea she closely ties to Arendt's 'right to rights'.

Where survival means both "mere life *and* more life" (Honig 2009: 10) it may stand for an enlivening generativity that overflows the attempt to keep things in order, to supply basic needs, to follow or return to settled paths. Perhaps 'home' might then be revalued, or made to give up some of its more settled ways, in view of the demands that shape emergence from crisis.

Honig's reflections on the problematics of 'emergence' suggest that it involves a way to lay claim to other *powers*, those revealed by an emergency, and truer to democratic forms of sovereignty than the sovereignty centred on a logic of the proper (whereby 'home' is that to which one rightly 'belongs'). As I have already suggested, there is much in the latter modality of sovereignty that follows from a rendering of the home as a place of exclusion that secures identity. Indeed, it may be that these classic forms of imagining a sovereign 'homeland' serve precisely to *conceal* vital powers. Emergence, by contrast, might ask us

> to give up on the dream of a place called home, a place free of power, conflict and struggle, a place -- an identity, a form of life, a group vision – unmarked or unriven by difference and untouched by the power brought to bear upon it by the identities that strive to ground themselves in its place. (Honig 1994: 563)

There is a performative dimension to the constitution of a 'home' that Honig foregrounds here, one that is erased when a homeland is figured as a given basis for political identity. Honig's distinctive treatment of questions of emergence also draws from William Connolly's work on the 'politics of becoming' (1995) foregrounding a futural aspect to inhabitation. This temporal 'becoming' includes living beyond or in excess of what has gone before: the 'disquieting awareness that we are in this moment partitioning a new time, creating a new world' (Honig, 2009: 54).

Metaphor, likewise, introduces the shock to think 'more' that Honig equates with emergency politics. The logic of concepts typically encounters new questions or experiences by asking how these are 'like' what came before; but in this way, it forecloses what is distinctive about emergency. Attending to the operation of metaphor adapts us

to acknowledging that 'likeness' is vitally and continually disrupted by the new and the critical. Considering home as metaphor would then unlock its potential via the ongoing question of how *what looks like* home appears as a question, or experiment 'after lockdown', and as such is generated anew.

In alignment with that way of taking up Honig's train of thought, among the traits of metaphor foregrounded by Paul Ricoeur (2003) is a certain im-propriety, expressed by a distinctive use of the copula (for example, 'an Englishman's home *is* his castle') to signal a form of non-identity while proposing alignment and extension. *Being-as*, both being and not-being, captures this modality, and thus how the troubled kinships of concepts may mark the emergent capacities of 'things' to be other than what they 'are'. Ricoeur, moreover, insists that metaphor never involves just a word, but engages semantics at the level of a sense-making enterprise, be its unit a sentence that provokes reflection, or a discourse inviting new ways of thinking and living. On such an account of metaphor, the work of finding words that do, and do not *make* sense, is at the same time the power to recreate reality, to form not only new images but new modes of inhabitation.

In what follows, I seek to chart some of the ways in which we seem to live in a time of emergence, focussing on how the metaphorics of 'home' figure in accounts of this. I begin, however, with Agamben's outrage at mandated lockdowns, which he viewed as a response whose putative concern for biosecurity merely served to inflate executive power. In this account, the metaphoric extension of 'home' is linked to the register of the 'proper' that grounds such powers. But does Agamben's way of figuring what it means to stay home block wider reflections on the potentials of this time of crisis, or what Honig names a politics of emergence?

3 Staying home, deciding

Early in the pandemic Giorgio Agamben berated the "techno-medical despotism" represented by stay-at-home orders (2021), seeing them as in line with the emergency powers of sovereignty to declare a state

of exception in which law could be legally suspended. The pretext of a pandemic served to curtail basic freedoms of movement and association, in ways that are continuous, in his view, with other threads of violence in the politics of modernity. COVID lockdowns only confirmed, as he put it, that the "state of exception has become the rule". Writing as his native Italy bore the first ravages of COVID and the government imposed strict lockdowns to protect the capacity of the health system to cope, Agamben saw revealed a certain trajectory of modern biopolitics. The liberal-bourgeois "right to health" concealed something more pernicious, he argued, whereby "health is becoming a juridical obligation that has to be fulfilled at all costs" (2021:29); a rationale for the sacrifice of the genuinely political potential of life, on the altar of the preservation of bare or mere life.

Such commitments to life-preserving measures are sovereignty-enhancing in two ways, on this account. *First*, the legal suspension of law defines sovereign decision, following Carl Schmitt's famous formula, "sovereign is he who decides on the exception" (2005: 5). This provides a unified, exclusionary image of sovereign power, for which modern nation-statehood serves metonymically. The nation is the site of a proper 'people', who are paradigmatically defined through their belonging to a homeland, enjoying a set of rights to membership that are conferred by birth. Thus, *second*, the modern 'citizen' whose life is to be secured and preserved, emerges through the transformation of natural bare life (birth) into a political body that incorporates (or corporealises) sovereignty. It is important, then, that in his reaction to the situation in Italy, Agamben does not object solely to the exercise of executive power under conditions of emergency. Lockdowns also offended in a second way that complements his understanding of the modern biopolitical inscriptions of sovereignty. The life encompassed by or metaphorically identified with this space of the *oikos* (as home/economy, site of a reproductive life opposed to the properly public political sphere) consumes all meaning when concern for its maintenance intrudes into the realm of the political.

It is worth noting here that whether the lockdowns were justifiable in some sense is irrelevant to Agamben's critique. What concerns him first, is that an expansion of executive prerogatives happened and should be taken into account, whether the lockdowns were potentially justified or not. In his second gesture, however, Agamben echoes certain strands of Hannah Arendt's thought on how the 'necessity' imposed by the reproduction of life provides a false grounding in modernity for political action (Arendt 1998; Agamben 1998). The current biopolitics of "techno-medical despotism" emerges from a governmental rationality that in its modern inception (with the French revolution) incorporates the politicised figure of natural life, or of birth into citizenship, such that the principle of sovereignty derives from the generativity of the nation as 'home'. On this broad account, the project of protecting life determines the human rights around which modern society is formed, following a logic that, as we have seen, one metaphorical register of 'home' tracks closely as sovereignty over territory. It generates a perpetual violence in the maintenance and determination of borders separating what is inside or proper from what is outside and improper. Moreover, the attachment to mere survival that modern biopolitics cultivates in populations, or to security above all else, persuades a population to consent to sacrifices of freedom that hitherto would have been unthinkable (2021: 34).

The political costs of lockdown, so Agamben argues, are therefore extreme. In the name of protecting health, we endure the loss of any real sense of community: "bare life, and the fear of losing it, is not something that unites people; rather it blinds and separates them" (2021: 18). Lockdowns thus force us to face a paradox, whereby "the end of all social relations and political activity is presented as the exemplary form of civic participation" (2021: 60). Digital technology as well as social distancing – "a new paradigm of social organization" (2021:61) -- propel us into forms of (non)relationship that happen without physical co-presence or contact, as adaptive practices such as 'working from home' enforce and enable social isolation. Here 'home', even when conceived as a site of belonging and of care, seems for Agamben to always appear subordinate to, indeed occupied by, its statist logic.

There are, however, reasons to press back against Agamben's account. If we query the limitations of this metaphorical register of 'home' as the 'proper/homeland', another set of interpretations of the situation of lockdown might emerge. Home, despite its intimate metonymical relation with 'homeland', is nevertheless differentiated from the state. Its political valence might equally be conceived as a place of dwelling that is resistant to being mobilised *merely* as a site of constraint and confinement imposed by the state. This is not exactly by virtue of being 'private', but rather by virtue of the home's privileged locus as a site of 'everyday exceptionalism' (a phrase Honig uses to name the political 'ordinariness' of the paradoxes arising from various forms of origination (2009: xviii)). This everyday exceptionalism is bound up with "*sur*-viving", as I will discuss further shortly, and thus persists even—or perhaps *especially*—in times of emergency.

The first aspect of Agamben's account might also be called into question by asking what kinds of decisions led to the regime of imposed lockdowns, confining people to their homes, and how the idea of home is related to this model of decision-making. Decision as the power of a subject, differs from decision as an exigency tracking the demands of a situation, which includes the dependencies that situation comprises. Situations, in other words, are not just to be managed through human agency, rather they *force* us to decide. Collective responses to emergency often take this form, as they did for many people during the pandemic. When emergency gives rise to critical needs, there is often little required on the part of governments to enforce the measures that seem most apt. Nor need this mean, as Agamben implies, that necessity is invariably put to *use* by sovereign power. People may come together even in extreme restrictions and understand their action as solidarity in a common cause. Thus, although it is the case that lockdown measures have been opposed by some, with particularly large protests in the USA spreading elsewhere later, there has also been strong and willing compliance for much of the pandemic to date. The uneven burden of these lockdown impositions has indeed been significant, and should not be under-estimated. But should we assume, with Agamben, that compliance in accepting lockdowns is merely a ruse of contemporary

bio-politics, sacrificing singularity to the register of 'health', and community to isolation? Or might we consider, with Honig, that modes of acceptance, acknowledgment and everyday practices represent sites where a community 'decide' how circumstances will be met, in part by working to establish what their meaning may *become* through that very action (2009:105).

On Honig's account, it would certainly be important to note the widespread *receptivity* to lockdown mandates. "The Schmittian idea of sovereign decisionism," she observes, "so focused on the power of sovereignty, tends to obscure from view the ongoing dependence of even the Schmittian version of sovereignty on popular subscription" (Rossello and Honig 2015). Whereas the sovereign suspension of normal lawfulness attaches the decision to a singular agent, Honig considers how decision may take more everyday forms - as *discretion*, for instance, "the ordinary administrative discretion upon which the rule of law is in any case dependent" (2009: 94). Insofar as the rule of law conceptually "refuses human agency when it aspires to regulate, command and police us" it also remains practically "dependent upon us, its subjects, to *do* the regulating, commanding and policing that the rule of law postulates and requires" (Honig 2009: 85).

The 'rule of law' is thus never far from the 'rule of man' (Honig 2009: 66) and all the more so when we live in an imposed isolation that nonetheless networks us in novel and imperfect ways to an extensive virtual world. The decisions that people made on how or whether to conform to mandated quarantine did indeed reflect public order policing, and yet they were not reducible to this. With significant opposition, the rules would be unenforceable, as they proved to be to some extent in several parts of the USA, where issues of lack of trust in government loomed large. That the rules were adhered to in many places, however, indicates that their mandate included a level of decision-making by peoples as much as by governments. But why speak of the mere 'rule of man' when we need to mark decision as somehow imperfect? What assumptions and ideals separate the image of 'rule of law' from the matters of discretion that for Honig marks the ultimate

dependency of law's application upon irreducible degrees of volition?

The idea of the 'rule of law' often sees adherence as ideally based on purely autonomous and rational processes. Yet there are other ways of thinking through this, perhaps more apt to the experience of being 'at home' with one another. For instance, care for one another is what Adriana Cavarero (2016) seeks to capture with the metaphorical register of 'inclination' as a mode of existence that is rendered invisible or downgraded in value by comparison with the 'uprightness' or 'rectitude' that the philosophical tradition has long associated with law. For Cavarero, the latitude by which our desire might enter fundamentally into relation with law is intimately bound up with our ways of being constituted by care, dependencies into which we all lean (or 'incline'). Forms of independence characterised by autonomy and rectitude also play a role in constituting a certain image of 'home' as private, representing a limit to outside interference. Both Honig and Cavarero, however, in disputing that account of home and of law, provide avenues for thinking about the ways in which compliance in lockdown may have been a gift or sacrifice households made for one another, owing more to relations of care entailed by cohabitation, than to any state or sovereign imposition.

4 Being connected, inclining

It should be recalled that staying home has not always meant pure isolation, as Agamben implies. For the majority of people in places like Australia or indeed Italy, this public health measure relied on unprecedented levels of access to a world that often required no physical co-presence for its reasonable – or what we might consider 'good enough' – functioning. 'Stay at home' measures have only been possible over extended periods of pandemic management because the interior life of the home is linked into the wider flows of connection that have permitted the simulacrum of collective life as usual: meeting, chatting, studying, shopping, waiting it out. This possibility certainly

represented relative privilege, assuming a job that could be transferred to the home-office, that a salary continued, and that 'essential workers' would deliver goods (all while the corporate giants of Silicon Valley provided and profited from virtual platforms for exchange). But notwithstanding the intensification of inequality wrought by this aspect of pandemic management, Agamben's point that staying home meant only deprivation of politically significant powers seems unduly narrow. Staying home, even with its implied interiority, has in multiple ways been premised on permeability, exteriorities, and the unsettlement as well as re-entrenchment of established borders. Indeed, the home has also taken on new forms of public visibility as a site of labour as well as dwelling in the pandemic. Home life – the life usually left behind when we go to work -- has become present as the domestic background to our Zoom meetings, an aspect of our virtual offices that has transfigured our self-images of who we are at work.

No unilateral evaluation of such complex patterns of change and disruption is ever possible. Rather there is an array of experiences and effects, alongside new forms of visibility and sensibility. For example, working from home has depended on making extended use of gendered relations of care, within and beyond the household, which have long been exploited by the state as if they belonged to a 'private' domain that conveniently supplies a cost-less labour and infrastructure. On the one hand, the closure of schools and offices readily led to an effective requisitioning of the home's feminised resources to serve the needs of continuing an economically productive life. On the other hand, this afforded a new visibility to the work of childcare and education, that might yet serve well as the basis for a set of demands aimed at redrawing the limits of private and public responsibilities (Jenkins and Smith 2021). Home appears estranged by forcible confinement to it, as it intertwines accessibility with privacy, or the sustaining life of care with what is deemed, by contrast, to be the productive life of work. We peer into one another's home-lives through our virtual meetings to see the child demanding attention, the cat insisting on caresses, the books in the background speaking of who someone is. All of these infiltrate the persona demanded by our public life: and not only with their novel

presences, normally confined to private spheres, but by introducing a certain tactile sensuousness. If this comes at the momentous expense to our normal outward persona of independence and autonomy, as Cavarero argues in pursuing questions about the tense relationship of *inclination* with figures of propriety and uprightness (2016), then staying home may be more subversive and interesting than Agamben allows.

To retreat to our homes seems to withdraw life from human co-presence, as Agamben viscerally and understandably mourns. Yet, at the same time, these unusual arrangements may realise another potential for co-existence and serve broadly as a prompt to question the places, routines, and order of everyday things. Anuradha Vikram, an artist invited with others to comment on what the pandemic has meant for their practice, offers a list of common beliefs challenged by living under lockdowns, including that

> workers need to convene for a third of their waking lives or operations will derail; smog is just part of living in cities; culture is about visiting and caring for objects; childcare is something that happens outside the workplace… (Vikram 2020)

For Vikram, staying home has recalibrated what is present and real. The "life we work to forget in order to become productive", she points out, is the life of the home that usually sustains us in some of the most fundamental ways. After lockdown, however, while the life of the home remains in implicit contrast with the 'productive' life of economic gain, homes are involved in constituting new ways of being together by technological means, or forming what she names a "wholly mediated space of coexistence". Her account thus offers a take on remote work very different from Agamben's and informed by seeing that the pandemic has presented concrete, lived alternatives to destructive or soulless patterns. We did not need to spend our waking lives together in offices, nor pollute cities on our way to and from them, nor maintain the rigid boundaries that separate our lives as parents and carers from our lives as workers. In place of these, Vikram imagines an emergent technology modelled on the body, and situated in the primacy of the everyday life hitherto eclipsed by the conventional accounting of

economic 'productivity'. Even cultural life has accommodated this radical change. Artistic practice has moved online, produced and accessed without travel to museums, galleries or concert halls. The figure of the caregiver, centred on the home, is revealed as extendable to public life, allowing a disruption of masculine imaginaries:

> Our institutions can become life-givers rather than mausoleums, dependent on a dichotomy of aesthetics and slaughter…. We could replace this dangerous tendency to dominate with a matriarchal and symbiotic way of being-together that recognizes we are permeable and interconnected life forms. Caretaking as a primary value includes supporting difficult projects of long duration and significant cost... We should prepare to imagine art forms that reach directly into homes and brains. (Ibid.)

For Agamben such thoughts must surely connote an extension of the surveillance and cultivation of the spheres of intimate private life that he associates with biopolitics. Yet there is, equally, much scope to question such conclusions and the powerful schemas that underpin them.

The imaginary of the 'home' and of the forms of life distributed around it, has received a jolt from the experience of life under lockdown. The emergency is charged with everyday potential, a thought Honig deploys to counter the extent to which a critique like Agamben's invests in the monolithic picture of sovereign decision it ostensibly opposes. Instead, we might usefully attend to the plural experiences of this time. For instance, the feeling of emergency may be connected with a timely and appropriate cultivation of a sense of urgency, necessary for preparing to meet other incipient disasters, notably climate change. A resistance to the promise of a 'return to normal' might arise from a sensibility cultivated by constrained -- yet inventive -- practises of inhabitation. A longing for transformation then becomes what marks our time within, and our emergence from, the confines of lockdowns. Inside/outside, public/private are among the foundations of 'home' that COVID has partially undone, even as 'home' shelters and preserves

ways of staying alive, delivering care along with, and perhaps precisely *through* transformed ways of living. Far from the sacrifice of the political that Agamben insists has taken place, then, being forced to stay home has normalised new patterns that may offer a response to multiple challenges and dangers, not only the one that prompted the changes.

'Home' is more than the economic substratum of mere survival, and neither figures of security nor care can fully subsume or comprehend the wide range of its meanings or lived realities. To some extent, no doubt, homes have been, at both state and individual level, metaphorical as well as actual places of withdrawal and safety—and not only from the virus, but from uncertainty, dilemma, decision, conflict, and being-with others. Important aspects of democratic life *did* suffer, for instance from the lack of opportunity to gather in public. Yet where it became essential to demonstrate, there was indeed public mass action, most notably in the resurgence of the 'Black Lives Matter' movement globally in the wake of George Floyd's murder at the hands of a police officer. No doubt there are irreducible aspects of our public worlds and shared spaces that were diminished and jeopardised by going 'virtual' under extended lockdowns. The body which needs to be nourished by the whole sensate array of taste, the vibrations of sounds, or touch, has suffered loss that remains un-substitutable. Sacrifice has indeed been a part of the experience of lockdown. Yet retreat and sacrifice may also be a way to *return* to all these political issues precisely by prodding us toward a recognition of the contingencies by which we frame a settled life. *Inhabitation* may constitute a 'critical zone' (as we will see Bruno Latour naming it) that, under stress, starts pressing on us, provoking a certain unravelling of the norms so tightly wound around it.

5 Staying inside, inhabiting

For Honig, the terms of an 'emergency' are in fact never very far from the ordinariness (and the ordinary struggles) we might associate with home. This is a *non-ideal* ordinariness, giving rise to a "call to de-exceptionalize the emergency" (2009: xviii). We do so, not by claiming that exception has been made the norm, but rather in observing that

what seems extraordinary are in fact everyday questions of conduct, even if we regularly fail to see them as such. For instance, the need for decisions that cannot be determined by precedent or prior experience, or the experience of undergoing rupture rather than following procedure are not rare. The kind of decision-making that Honig foregrounds as 'discretion' was involved at multiple levels of the pandemic response, in part *via* a sense of the importance of affirming our interdependency, 'being in it together'. We might then see the pandemic response as involved in an exercise in discretion, insofar as governments had to cautiously decide what to do in the absence of certainties, and in view of all the challenges of knowing whether the measures they had taken over-stepped or under-stepped the mark. Popular reaction (which on the whole was positive and compliant) also involved people in decisions on whether and how far to accede. The importance of broad popular acceptance of the lockdown strategy indicates how such government decisions and policies on the whole imply willing uptake and thus room for resistance or negotiation; their action in this sense is not unilateral but relational, or as Honig puts it:

> [S]overeignty is not simply that which decides the exception. It is a contingent formation that might get relocated or redistributed in contests over whether a state of exception should be instituted, in what such a state of exception should consist, and about when it should end. […] [W]e switch our gaze from sovereign to popular power or to sovereignty as implicated in and dependent upon popular power. (2009: 88-9)

Honig here weighs the importance of popular sovereignty as an ever-present opportunity of becoming open to a future lived with others, of becoming a community that is based neither in identity nor certainties, nor a prior law. Discretion, upon which the rule of law is dependent, thus marks for her the *ordinariness* of decision and, at the same time, its *miraculous* nature; whereby the need for finding a way through risks that are never fully calculable, meet forms of multi-lateral responsibility that attach to such imperfect powers (2009:94). By contrast, Agamben reiterates a form of sovereign decisionism (and in ways that dictate the

mode of his critique) that he sees manifested in an increasing turn to deploy executive power via the securitization of health.

In attending to *emergence* as an expansive counter to the "life-narrowing survival orientation of emergency," while acknowledging the way emergency politics can wither democratic aspirations, Honig directly opposes Agamben's assertion that emergency inevitably serves to entrench sovereign power (as he sees having happened in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, or now in the pandemic response). She also captures well what many of those responding to the pandemic as a time of *disclosure,* of potentials hitherto unseen, have insisted upon. The daily practices into which the pandemic has pressed us, its deprivations but also its gifts, may well initiate both resourcefulness and resources. Although the experience of emergence may traumatise us with the tragic sense of being forced into decisions with no ideal or optimal outcome, or inform a sense of politics as a time when powers of decision become foregrounded or inflated, these are not in fact entirely 'exceptional' circumstances. Indeed, Honig argues that they form the basic condition of democratic politics and lay the ground for laying claim to a right to rights. The question will be what we do with these circumstances, how the chances, remainders, and sacrifices of this time give energy to what is claimed for the future, making crisis an "ethical and political opportunity to be acted upon" (2009: 131).

We have perhaps become all too familiar with the phrases "never waste a crisis" and "build back better". Yet in *After Lockdown: A Metamorphosis* (2021), Latour's meditation on the transformative experience of lockdown goes further. He proposes that it has brought us face-to-face with our inhabitation of a world wildly different to the imaginary one that we 'normally' occupy.

> You were forced to wake up out of a dream and ask yourselves: 'so where the hell did I live before?' Well, in the Economy, actually, meaning *somewhere other than at home*. (2021:70)

To be locked down is to confront "inhabitual questions", and to these *home* is necessarily central. The pre-lockdown "imaginary" world, Latour argues, is the ordinary one of our most advanced, yet

collectively suicidal forms of rationality: composed of a toxic mixture of Cartesian habits of scientific thinking, a failed secularisation (which has merely stripped away care for the Earth as God's creation, while maintaining inviolate the fantasy of human transcendence) and the myths of Economy. All these structures of thought have maintained our all-too-human confidence in being elsewhere, anywhere but *here*. Far from a retreat to propriety, being-grounded by lockdown has served at once to limit, situate, confine, and sustain us, while also invigorating an existential meaning of 'territory', as arising from relations of interdependency, rather than the top-down administration of order. Home, Latour suggests, can be conceived as the ongoing living engendering of interdependencies. Economy, meanwhile, works primarily to disguise the situation of interdependency that conditions all terrestrial dwelling.

In returning us to the inhabitation of a home, Latour delivers an account of the "nomos of the earth" as arising from the entangled fate of its life-forms, whose ways of staying alive enable or undo our own possibilities of living, and thus impose obligations that define us. For Carl Schmitt, whose book is of course Latour's point of departure, *nomos* is a direct function of the Aristotelian *oikonomia* writ large and expanded beyond the single "household", while the "earth" serves as a master trope for the imaginary of "peoples" defined by "homelands" and their territorial markers. For Latour a more genuine sense of "territory" becomes manifest in lockdown as a *situation marked by interdependency*. The home we inhabit as a matter of such interdependency must acknowledge our attachments as encounters with "entities that force us to take care of them" (72).

All this leads Latour to conclude that to be at home, a person must realise it "no longer belongs to him, he is judged by it" (87). To inhabit a site of interdependency is to find it presenting us with decisions that arise from our situation. In the metaphorical resister of *inhabitation*, the place we call 'home' is mapped by commitments forged to the extent that we need, and therefore are affiliated with others (73). If the acts of decision Schmitt saw as defining sovereignty indeed arise by

virtue of the very capacity to stipulate a border, to exclude aliens, and thereby to frame identity as *self-sufficiency*, they belie the fact that no state – or 'home' – exists without multiple upstream and downstream dependencies. Latour's metaphorical exploration of 'home' in terms of the 'terrestrial' aims to fundamentally reshape our understanding of the 'nomos of the earth', with seismic consequences. Humans, Latour suggests, have been rendered more or less extinct by the pandemic, not by virtue of succumbing to disease, but insofar as a relation to their 'home' has come to represent a fiction of exclusionary rights that has fully outlived its intelligibility, along with its capacity to sustain life. We have come to *feel* uneasy, Latour proposes, with an idea or sense of the 'human' so tightly bound up with the home afforded by a nation-state.

The experience of lockdown has thus been one of *metamorphosis*. Latour suggests that the eerie feeling of 'after lockdown' is perfectly rendered by Kafka's story. Gregor, in becoming an insect, leaves his human home behind, and indeed finds it no longer intelligible, emerging as one who, far from being diminished, is able to move around freely. For Gregor, the extraordinary (waking up as an insect) becomes an everyday matter of conduct. He finds and accepts that he lives in a new space which he will be 'inside' forever, a place that his own ways of living will engender; whereas his parents – the old 'humans' -- remain trapped inside a home that they wish to 'own' but cannot afford (27). The key to his happy metamorphosis is thus the sacrifice of an old ideal of transcendence. As Latour muses, "to get out of it, we need to get out of the idea of getting 'out', and so we need to *stay* and even to go *inside*!" (53) Lockdown might likewise save us, in so far as it forces a transition into a 'form' of inhabitation that renders the old one unintelligible.

Latour's idea of 'home' as inhabitation, is thereby indexed to a metamorphosis inherent to permeable and extended bodies. Such bodies do not only *share* their living-space with, but are existentially co-dependent with multiple lifeforms. Lifeforms *never* possess the imaginary integrity associated with autonomy; they never 'have' lives or homes. Latour's image for this is the termite mound, built like an

exoskeleton, produced in symbiosis with specialized fungi able to digest wood, an 'environment' made of the debris of living things, without which the termite could not survive. Except that even the word 'environment' makes no sense here, when "you can never draw a boundary line that would distinguish an organism from what surrounds it. Strictly speaking nothing surrounds us. Everything conspires in our breathing" (13). To be terrestrial, then, is to live *inside*, while giving up the idea of boundaries --and their generation of an idea of 'outside'--as abstractions or metaphors we can no longer live by. Latour takes the experience of lockdown to communicate that we live within a 'critical zone' that sustains all life, a home counterposed to the idea of 'nature' with its order of laws. This 'home' is too indeterminate to match the idea of the 'Universe', and nor is it a 'container' that holds and sustains us. Latour asks "what does it mean for politics if we are locked in and are not in the infinite cosmology opened by Galileo? It means we cannot behave in the same way."

> Gone is the infinite space; now you are responsible for the safety of this overbearing dome as much as you are for your own health and wealth. It weighs on you, body and soul. To survive under these new conditions, we have to undergo a sort of metamorphosis. (Latour, Guardian, 2020)

Other commentators likewise see the profound lessons of the pandemic in its existential revelations. An airborne disease, one that thrives on the intimacy of bodies in their constant but unseen gaseous exchange, has both destructively and productively exposed the many intersecting threads of life -- metaphorically and in effect. As Mel Y Chen notes, the dominant logic of property/propriety, which provides the basis of homes understood to be first and foremost 'owned' proves astoundingly inadequate, for instance, to comprehending the value of the fresh air that makes such places *liveable*. And like a miasma, the subtle forms that COVID-19 takes are more than biological, permeating the social air we breathe:

> one could argue, COVID-19 both is and isn't the name of a virus. It is many, many things—many histories, many bodies, many politics.

> It is also the name of differential bodily burdens, differential state resourcing, and differential state securitizations under terms that create bifurcations between care and murder. (Chen, 2021: 22-23)

Not only should we see as dual aspects, inseparably entwined, the forms of socio-political and biological agency of COVID-19, Chen suggests, but we must viscerally recoil before the inadequacy of our current legal systems and economic concepts to the demands the virus imposes. As a biopolitics unwinds that "naturalizes the view of public services and public health advisories as aimed at the individualized protection of one's "own" health" (Chen: 27) COVID-19 is at work beyond the limits that its simple, literal designation as 'a virus' would allow. For example, it is generating obligations around an invisible and all too often neglected condition of life, such as the availability of clean air to breathe. We encounter, or find ourselves answerable to a *situation*; we respond to a *nomos* of the air, as Latour might say.

In this context, Chen points out that the 'queerness' of non-normalized bodies has become prescient, anticipating the re-configuration of 'home' that we all must learn to navigate (just as Latour likewise evokes Gregor's bodily prescience). Bodies that do not 'belong' (and certainly not in public spaces) chart a consciousness of the non-private conditions of our existence that is lagging in the 'normal' perception. The disabled, for instance, have asked, "is this what it took for you to make the conditions we need universally available, enforceable, 'public'?" (Chen: 26). In emergence, we might attend to the prescience of certain bodies and the interdependencies they expose.

6 Emergence and the right to rights

Our response to emergency includes our metaphorical efforts to find ways of saying what we have been passing through, a language for what has happened, or for the affects and longings such times have engendered. We have seen that the pandemic, precisely in generating constraints and interruptions to established ways of living, frequently appears as an agent of change. A focus on the metaphorical and political life of 'home' in these recent times serves to embed large

vistas in the everyday, as Vikram, Latour and Chen all demonstrate. As they make so vivid, the shelter afforded to life by a home, and the multiple relations and dependencies that this in turn implies, has allowed the experience of lockdowns to offer some surprising lessons. Lockdown has brought us to face, with a jolt, the paradox that "all the legal and scientific tools which used to allow 'humans' to think about their relationships were applied to a world no-one had ever inhabited!" (Latour, 2021:45).

In response, Honig might ask: How do we further take up the disruptive energy this time of crisis has released? How do we unfold and narrate it? (2009: 64). One line of thought she pursues concerns the re-activation of an understanding of 'public good'. Governments have in several unexpected ways been forced to put care for the population before other economic imperatives. This concern for the wider public good strongly contrasts with the privatisation of responsibility that has in the last neoliberal decades been presented as a solution for many a public policy problem (Brown 2015) and is now once again resurgent in the later phases of the pandemic. For example, in the USA, as elsewhere, at the start of the pandemic new public spending was provided at unprecedented levels to house the homeless and take care of those unable to work. Alongside measures to prevent landlords evicting tenants, the idea that public health requires access to secure and affordable homes has enabled positive interventions to curb the market and supplement welfare. Lockdowns entailed that home must be understood as a public resource, as much as a private retreat.

Although in an emergency the habit of privatisation is hard to break and the desire for personal control especially powerful, to attend to alternatives *revealed* by emergency, may constitute the precise dimensions of our emergence. Emergency politics, Honig observes, could be a "politics of civic emergence—in which people emerge to claim the rights of citizenship by forcing sovereign powers into helpless perplexities of volition" (Rossello and Honig, 2015). A politics of emergency might thereby avoid the fate imagined by Giorgio Agamben, as one in which "citizens are re-impressed into the logic of sovereignty

and obedience." (as Honig puts it, Rosello and Honig, 2015). It might instead unleash a moment of "popular receptivity and immanence" to "highlight the dependence of the so-called state of exception upon democratic energies and to mark its vulnerability to democratic action and resistance" (Honig, 2009: 87). We also need this emergence to establish ways to maintain and foreground our interdependencies. For Honig this means to orient ourselves democratically in relation to public things, to harness their magical powers of adhesion, and to commit to their maintenance and protection (Rosello and Honig, 2015).

I conclude, then, with an example that Honig herself offers (2020). A new commitment to the right to housing, she suggests, might take popular form as a response to the pandemic's effect of bringing to light its maldistribution under market conditions. The pandemic has, after all, illuminated the ability of the state to offer clear correctives to the market and to undertake strong and effective action to promote public welfare. She cites the 'Takings' provision of the Fifth Amendment of the US constitution, which allows for private land or property to be taken by the government for public use, provided that just compensation is provided. In view of securing the 'right to rights' represented by a home, this provision might support yet more action than the simple moratoria on rents conceded during the peak of the lockdowns. In 2019, after all, the Trump administration invoked the Amendment to force property owners to give up their land to build the Mexican border wall (2020:148). How much better would it be to give homeless people access to the "several empty units in Trump Tower and vacancies in all Trump's properties throughout the country" (2020: 146)?

For it is not enough, Honig argues, to merely suspend evictions, which would return as soon as the state of emergency was deemed to be concluded, nor to place a moratorium on rents that will consequently build up to impossible levels. Rather, the time of emergency needs to be thought differently, less as a suspension from which the normal will resume, than as a beginning that always already subsists in the everyday. There is *always* the potential for action that unsettles rather than repeats sedimented injustices. Honig quotes the words of one occupier, making

a home in a vacant house that the State had purchased in readiness for an expanded freeway:

> This is public land. This is a taxpayer house. You paid for it. I paid for it. We all paid for it. All these vacant houses on public land should be used for public good, to create real, affordable housing. (2020: 149)

Under circumstances that demand a politics of emergence, even a lockdown might serve to call into being forms of justice that are more apt to common terms of inhabitation, than the homes we thought we knew.

Perhaps for Honig, then, the answer to Arendt's demand for a 'right to rights' involves the ongoing exercise of asserting that the *discretion* of the people has priority in democratic sovereignty. The people are not given their claim to sovereignty by 'having a homeland' that marks their identity. On the contrary, 'the people' is always a temporal work in process, democratically emerging precisely by acknowledging the precedence of *responding well* to a situation over *preserving* excessive rights to property. The right to rights takes pliant form by attending to our profoundly interdependent modes of inhabitation as a condition of enjoying the provisional rights of ownership. Democracy then has a "housing that shelters it" (Honig, 2020: 149) only through the ongoing exercise of discretion, of taking rights, or being inclined toward laws. It is a lifeform, with "ways of staying alive" that as Latour, too, reminds us, must involve necessary phases of metamorphosis. Could learning this be one of our ways of emerging?

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