

# Arriving and arriving and arriving

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As you will likely know, I have spent the past five years in movement. First a move from London to Sydney with my partner, where we have lived on the unceded lands of the Gadigal people for what was initially supposed to be three years and has now extended into an indefinite time. Then in late 2018 I took the most beautiful opportunity to work with Luis Carlos Sotelo Castro helping set up the Acts of Listening Lab at Concordia University on the unceded lands of the Kanien'kehá:ka Nation in Tiohtià:ke/Montréal – a position that should have lasted two years but which I have (with deep regret) left early due to the pandemic. During the time I was working there, I travelled back and forth across the world more than once a year in order to sustain both my job and my relationship with my partner. Now I find myself suddenly back in Sydney; the apartment I have been calling home sitting empty in Montreal; my (elderly) parents and sister in England; extensive blood family in India; chosen family all over the world. I have been living globally, dropping into communities and friendships, writing letters and sending voicelets, but never staying long enough on the ground to be counted (on). All of this movement that so many of us took for granted has come to a sudden standstill. In my last blog post, I reflected a little on the feelings of pain and confrontation that change (actual, real change, as opposed to the kind of change I can experience without destabilising my own privilege or comfort) brings. This one feels more personal – a reflection on my own journey – a document of what that kind of once carefree movement across borders has felt like in these past months – and a record of the kindnesses and questions I have encountered along the way. It's a long read, I imagine only of interest to friends who care to know how I've been going. If you're up for the long read right now, thank you for your companionship.

## 1. Tiohtià:ke/Montréal



Mid-March. I'm in my beautiful sublet in Montreal, on the 21st floor, overlooking the city. My university has closed. All my work for this year has been cancelled. I understand that staying isolated is an act of love that I have the luxury to perform, so I go into my own early lockdown, avoiding any time in other people's homes, and only going out when absolutely necessary, washing hands frequently and using rubbing alcohol to wipe down door handles and occasional grocery purchases. I already hate this social distancing, and I notice how much I appreciate the looks. Over the next two weeks I notice more and more human connection. People smiling under masks, so their smile is visible in their eyes. People

leaving distance between us as we pass, but nodding, as if to say: yes, we are doing this for each other.

When the isolation began, I left a note for my elderly neighbours on either side, asking them to contact me if they needed anything, and offering to do groceries. It feels like we often make these kinds of gestures, but they are rarely followed up. This time, it's different. We have to reach out. The lady next door calls me. She speaks french. I understand just enough to be able to communicate. She tells me that she is well but she is over seventy and has been advised to stay home. She asks how we would do it if I were to get groceries for her. We come up with a system. A few days later, she calls again to say it's time. She leaves empty shopping bags, a detailed shopping list in careful handwriting, and some money in an envelope outside my door, knocking loudly before returning to her apartment. I go down and buy things for her from three different shops in our building. I wear a mask. I am careful with touching things. I wipe them down before leaving them outside her door, giving a knock, and walking away. She calls out, "Merci beaucoup." She phones later to thank me for my kindness. It doesn't feel like kindness. It feels like reciprocity. Reciprocity is what I have long been hungry for.

I make hot chocolate and cake for a small group of people who are living on the streets very near my home. I figure they must be suffering because of the social distancing. I am very careful not to touch anything or breathe on anything while I bake, and hand over the goods in a paper bag while wearing winter gloves. They are full of joy. I am full of joy. We chat a little, at a distance. I learn that one of them is called Lola. During this time as most of us have looked more and more harried and worried, this small group of people has continued smiling every day. I am so grateful for their smiles, and wish I had made friends with them earlier in my time living here. What is it that stops us from being kind to each other, or even noticing each other? The learnt behaviours of capitalism become easier to notice and more noticeably absurd to me during this time.

Over these two weeks, the pandemic is declared, and things start changing swiftly around the world. It suddenly feels like nothing is a given. I feel into both the challenge and the possibility of this. I wonder about whether I should try and return home to Sydney, to be with my partner. I flip and flop in my decision, one day to the next. I am safe in Montreal. I have a beautiful apartment, and a good network of friends and chosen family who will take care of each other. I am seen and held. It doesn't make sense to travel during a pandemic. I want to stay. And I also know that in wanting to stay I am holding on to a life that no longer exists.

At a certain point I realise that no one can make this decision for me. There is something profoundly liberating about this. I am used to looking over at someone else to check whether I am doing right or wrong, good or bad. And now? Suddenly there is no validation of right or wrong that comes from outside, because nobody knows, and nobody is even pretending to know. There is only a decision that I have to make and that I have to live with. So many of these decisions being made every day by each of us. Heart choices, hard choices that will determine whether we get to be with loved ones when they die.

I wait, feeling into the decision.

I know it will come.

And then, against many odds, I decide to leave.

## 2. Travel



There is a narrative that starts to surface around this time: go home. It is a simple narrative, and a simplifying narrative. It says that everyone should return home. And for some people, it is more or less clear what this means. For some people, it is an easy decision. Home = one place. Family = one unit, or one location, or one person. For some people, home = safety or security, and returning is an option. For others, not. Many people tell me it would make them happy to know that I am with my partner during this time. I know that it will make me happy to be with my partner, and that I will be safe there. But I am deeply resistant to the idea that this is the only narrative, or even the most important narrative of this moment. I have many loves, many lives, many homes. Perhaps more importantly I feel that now, more than ever, we must connect with a wider sense of what it means to be family. I want to use this moment to open up, not to close down.

In spite of this, I decide to leave, and to travel during the pandemic, knowing that it might be a very long time before this kind of choice is available to me if I stay. I leave knowing that I cannot come back, that Canada has closed its borders, and so has Australia. It is a one way decision. I have spent the past years moving between worlds. I strongly believe that this is a role I have been born into – queerness fluidity not-knowing and inbetweenness are written into me at a very deep level. But I also know that flying in an aeroplane is not the only way to move between worlds.

In the moment I make my decision to leave, I understand that everything I need is within me. I am keenly aware of my privilege as I spend \$2,000 on a one-way ticket to a country in which I have 'permanent residency' on unceded lands. I feel something that I have been lucky enough to experience only a few times in my life: that my movement is shaped by government policy, and my freedom is held in place by the decisions made at borders. And at the same time, something shifts inside me as I accept this reality. I trust something deeper, a history that is longer than those borders or governments, and therefore both longer and wider than my life.

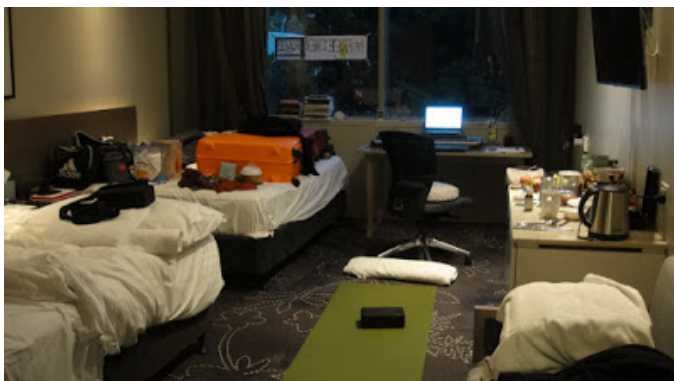
At 7.15am on the morning of my scheduled (evening) departure, I check my flight status online, and find out that my flight has been cancelled and I have been rebooked onto a flight that leaves at 8am. I knew this might happen. We have moved into a world where getting a notification of a change or cancellation is rare. Airlines are barely functioning. I throw my clothes on, call a taxi, and head straight to the airport. I am lucky there are still taxis operating in Montreal. I am lucky that there are still just enough flights that Air Canada can re-route me that day. And then, without any goodbyes, I am on my way to Sydney, via Toronto and Vancouver, unshowered, hungry, my belongings shoved into all the vessels I could appropriate into suitcases on short notice. I contact friends and ask them if they can clean up after me. I left my apartment with dirty dishes in the sink, a half-eaten meal in the fridge, my bedclothes in disarray from my rushed departure. Many of my belongings are still in Montreal, but belongings feel secondary in this moment. As I struggle through airports over the next 30 hours, lugging a cheap midi keyboard

under my arm and three other bags full of stuff, I understand that being in this body is the only thing that matters. I feel like a human being, part of a species, struggling to survive, riding out this collapse that we have made and trying to learn how to plant seeds for a simpler and wiser future.

I spend hours waiting in Toronto airport, and then again in Vancouver airport. Both airports feel like an embrace between chaos and emptiness. There are no trolleys, barely any people, and almost all the shops are shut. Airport staff, airline staff, and travellers are dotted around in various levels of protective gear. A few people seem to have no protection at all, going about their business, gathering in groups, as if there were no pandemic. Many people, myself included, wear disposable gloves and masks. I see one person in a full body suit, with gloves, mask, and goggles. I am wearing a tailored suit and a silk shirt. I usually wear super comfy clothes when travelling long distance. But this time I wanted to feel glamorous. Glamour as armour, as safety, a talisman to get me safely across the world one last time.

During the flight, they don't serve any drinks apart from bottled water, which is limited to two tiny bottles per person. There are no meal services on the short flights, and on the sixteen-hour flight they bring around pre-packed food, once in the evening, once in the morning. There are no 'special meals'. When one of the crew members realises that I cannot eat the prepackaged meal they have brought around, he sends half of his meal to my seat, so that I have something to eat. I am bowled over by this gesture. Some of the crew members are, understandably, snappy and rude, their fear and exhaustion seeping through. But in this moment this person chooses to be compassionate and I am flooded with gratitude at his kindness. What used to be a transactional relationship within a service economy suddenly feels as if it has transformed into a reciprocal one. Throughout my experience of travelling during the pandemic, I have encountered people who are choosing this as a moment of connection and compassion. Every time it happens, I notice how much it changes me, how it feels like it changes everything.

### 3. Quarantine



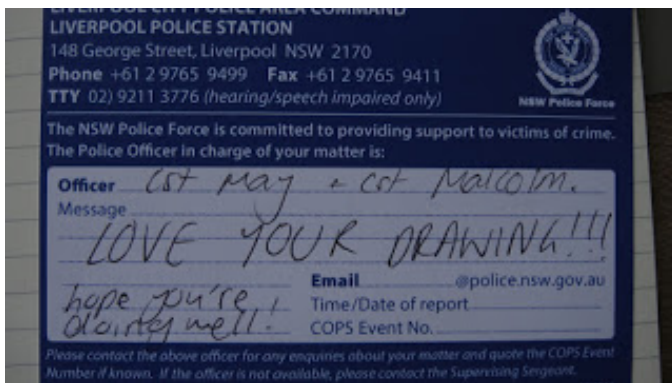
It was two days before leaving that I found out the Australian Government was going to make everyone arriving into the country quarantine for 14 days in "hotels or other accommodation". I almost lost my nerve. The Australian Government is known for its xenophobia and racism. It sounded terrifying. And when we walked off the plane, and I saw the people from first class and business class, I smiled to myself thinking: we're all in this together, *even the people who travelled first class*. I have to say this brought me some joy. It was only later that I realised this was going to work in my favour. Later I realised that because we were all citizens and permanent residents, we would be treated well, and because this 'we' included those who have power, financial or otherwise, we would be treated really well.

The hotel I am housed in is a four star hotel – somewhere I would never be able to afford to stay in for two weeks on my own terms. There is a desk, there are two double beds, there is a beautiful bathroom

with a bath and a shower. For two weeks, we are served food three times a day, and can order snacks from the hotel menu. We are given fresh towels and toiletries every two days, and fresh sheets once a week. I can call the hotel staff at any time to make a request or ask a question. After a few days, they even introduce a grocery service, so that families can order extra provisions. At the same time, populations of less importance to the government – refugees, prisoners, the homeless – are denied safe accommodation.

During this time, people keep asking me if I'm okay – I mean, friends ask, but also mental health nurses call to check on me, the Red Cross calls twice, and medical staff call every day to see if I have any symptoms. One day, I get into a short conversation with the nurse who has called. I tell her I am grateful for the work she is doing, the work they are all doing to look after us. She says that my kind words have made her day, and that I am the only person who has said something positive to her about the work they are doing. I hear on the news and from friends that some people are complaining about 'prison-like' conditions in the quarantine hotels because we are not allowed to leave our rooms. I find their phrasing deeply offensive at a time when prisoners are at such high risk of contracting the virus. I dream about a world in which people in prison and others who are in vulnerable situations receive the same treatment as I am receiving. I have a deep hope that all those people who are struggling with their quarantine hotel experience will dedicate their post-quarantine life to prison reform.

I come to treasure the interactions I have with staff at the hotel, and even with the police. None of these are face to face. Each of our meals comes in a paper bag, and every night someone writes a joke or little message by hand on the bag that houses our dinner. This detail is amazing to me – in the middle of a pandemic, within a police operated quarantine, someone thought this was important. I start drawing little pictures and leaving them out with my dinner bag when I have finished to say thank you. About halfway through my stay, I receive a note form the police:



Near the end of my stay, I get a knock on the door, and am surprised to find that when I open it there are two people standing outside. Usually there is a knock and when I open the door there is food or towels. This time, two male-presenting white-passing Aussie policemen greet me and say they are doing a room check. They take my name, and my phone number, and then they leave. They are friendly and formal. I find myself longing to keep them there, to make some kind of chat that would mean we would stand around and banter for a while. But I am totally lacking the language of banter that would be appropriate for this situation. I hear others further down the corridor laughing. I close the door and feel a deep longing. Later, it strikes me that I am craving human to human connection. It doesn't matter who the people are. I never thought I would feel fondly towards the police, or that they would thank me for my drawings. This is an upside-down state for me. It is an indication that things are not as normal, and that what was assumed can be un-assumed. Confusing as they are, these are the moments when I have felt grounded in all of this: the moments when I remember and live into the fact that care and compassion are all that we have.

#### 4. (always) Arriving



Back in my apartment in Sydney. I wake every morning and wonder if I will be arrived yet. This question about arriving is a luxury. I have enough time and space in my life right now to notice that I am often expecting to wake into my childhood bed these days, that I don't know which season comes next, that the timelines in my life are jumbled around. I know that these are ways in which my body is processing this moment with its own intelligence.

I have often written or spoken about things like kindness and difficulty, care and (dis)ease, or reciprocity. Now I come back to them as urgent matters. I feel more than ever that we need to re-learn for ourselves how to both give and receive, separate from desire or shame or guilt or greed. How to develop the skills to do this without going into a mode of protection and separation from each other. We are not our money, our love, our resources. But we have a choice to allow those to flow or not flow.

Turning this world upside down, in the small ways, can bring about change. Or rather, turning this world upside down allows for change. We can make that change ourselves, in small ways, amending the systems that used to be default in our own behaviours. I can make friends with my neighbours, inside and outside the building where I live. I can cook for someone who does not have that skill or cannot find the energy. I can ask my friends to be there for me. This is the work of reciprocity. It is complex, and it is simple.

Now I am trying to do the work of not returning, not going back into old patterns.

Now I am trying to feel my way into what reciprocity looks like at a deeper level.

Now I looking for allies who are ready to turn things around, or are already doing this work.

Now I realise that the work of arriving and arriving and arriving I've been doing over these years was preparation for this moment of collapse. I am not ready, and maybe that is the point.

Becoming and becoming and becoming.