“Nowhere Else to Be: Time, Space, and the Fiction of Synchronicity”

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Digital connectivity has allowed us to maintain a temporal if not spatial experience of synchronicity during quarantine with our families, colleagues, students, and friends. Conceptualizing media-enabled synchronicity takes on a new urgency within the pandemic as we begin to question the possibility, value, and limitations of collective experiences of simultaneity more broadly. In theorizing synchronous versus asynchronous interactions, events, and media consumption, the focus is on shared *time*. Here, in thinking through connection in the time of COVID-19, I consider not only the temporal but also the spatial components of synchronicity, emphasizing the extent to which pandemic connectivity and its attendant media usage has revealed the multifaceted role space plays in both enabling and refusing synchronicity.

To what extent have we experienced time synchronously throughout pandemic isolation? Globally, we have experienced disjointed yet repetitive timelines unfolding continuously across the world, as later-hit countries watched early coronavirus hotspots descend into chaos at the beginning of 2020. Just before New York spiraled out of control, Italians took to YouTube, warning unconcerned Americans to take the coronavirus seriously: *We are you two weeks from now*, they said. *You are watching your future*. Inadequate governmental responses allowed time to proceed as delayed sequences of synchronically ordered patterns, asynchronously experienced. Quantitatively similar temporal sequences unfurled worldwide like variations on a theme, with onlookers unwittingly glimpsing weeks in advance what would become their own fates. On an individual level, much pandemic coverage has focused on duration. Those quarantined at home have noted that time seemed to stall in the initial weeks of lockdown, before speeding up during the ensuing months of repetitive isolation.

Yet many essential workers, who saw increased demands on their daily work schedules, did not experience the same temporal rupture. Unbounded by our established habits and routines, we are out of time with one another. Nevertheless, despite these differences, the impulse to experience our isolation *together* remains. Many have turned to entertainment media to produce communal experiences of belated synchronicity. Millions streamed *Tiger King* alone so that they might discuss it together later on Twitter. Others had their avatars visit friends' islands in *Animal Crossing* or hopped onto Instagram live, seeking that jolt of temporal connectivity born from eyes around the world simultaneously watching the same images across different screens. We have attempted to reproduce the experience of being together by sharing the same time, if not the same space.

What, then, are the limitations or dangers of a space-less, digitally-enabled temporal synchronicity? That our online simulations of synchronous experiences of school, work, and happy hour are heavily mediated and contingent is highlighted by the looming threat that any Zoomer with a poor Internet connection could at any point deteriorate into a garbled, robotic voice issuing from a frozen, distorted image. More serious issues of accessibility are born out of systemic barriers to Internet access and the ableist structures that undergird online modes of address. Online synchronicity also is susceptible to attention-based interruptions, as we can turn off our sound or video during meetings to watch the news, finish cooking dinner, or even use the toilet. Of course, scholars from Jenkins and Manovich to Bolter and Grusin have demonstrated that we already experienced and interacted with media in overlapping ways well before quarantine. Furthermore, dismissing digital temporal synchronicity simply because it does not include a spatial component risks essentializing an imaginary, pure, unmediated connection enabled only by physical presence, ignoring the reality that all human interactions are always already mediated. Yet shared time in the absence of shared space has impacted the expectations on an individual's capacity for labor and companionship alike.

Now more than ever, we are expected to be available at all times for all things. Whereas previously a parent might be excused from childcare duties while delivering a lecture in a classroom, a crying baby in the next room could require immediate attention while thirty students look on through their computer screens. In 2013, Jonathan Crary noted the extent to which the "work day" has become ever more tenuously defined in the world of 24/7 connectivity. In quarantine, interpersonal connection similarly is uncontained, as it becomes impossible to turn down an invitation to a family call or online trivia because we have *nowhere else to be*. We are confronting the fact that the subtext to our previous ability to claim "I don't have the time" was actually "I don't have the space." The presence of one's physical body in a discrete location—say, the office or a restaurant—was excuse enough to not attend a party, break for lunch with a partner, or take a phone call. Now, the physical space of the home is the office, daycare, hospital, gym, and restaurant, and any one of the tasks we might be expected to perform or identities we might be required to assume tied to a given space could be called upon at any moment, perhaps simultaneously. Which is to say that even as experiences of synchronicity such as shared meetings or classes have begun falling away, synchronic demands on labor and identity have increased—a temporal increase due to the degradation of spatial boundaries. Quarantine finally has presented everyday life as an overt singularity, with all of our external spaces collapsed into just one space of confinement from which we must conduct all interactions. This collapse emphasizes the extent to which spatial boundaries—precarious and fluid though they have been since the rise of the Internet—previously kept our various individual identities and labor requirements distinct. That we might shed any given identity simply because we are in one space versus another—the classroom versus the home, for instance—was always a fiction of synchronous experience, but it also was protective. What already were gradually eroding space-based distinctions have been shattered by Internet-connected quarantine. In embracing asynchronous forms of work and communication, we

simply trade one version of synchronicity for another: we function in an imagined asynchronous base state characterized by the perpetual potential to be called into synchronous activity.

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