

## Out of Time. Work, Love and Care in a Pandemic

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This essay is a compilation of letters that were drafted during the first year of the pandemic. It's one-side correspondence that explores in a very intimate way the problems with work, the separation between productive and reproductive labour and the challenges of care during the lockdown. It's a reflection on maternity, distance, time and love in a time of uncertainty.

Dear Simon,

It's good that you are home. You managed to return just barely. When you arrived to Mexico things were so different. We thought that our trip to Sweden in April might get cancelled —as it has— but we never thought that you might get stuck in Mexico. We were very lucky that my sister found you that flight to Cape Town from N.Y.; it might be one of the last flights to South Africa from America in a while.

It's been hard without you. I know is the best for all but it was nice to be with you in this moment of great uncertainty, fear and anxiety. I was very nervous of not knowing if you were going to be able to leave, and the possibility of you getting sick here with a Public Health System that might collapse, was terrifying. But I was also happy. In all this chaos having you here gave me a space of content and exceptionality.

The effects of this crisis are still to come. Discourses are centralized in notions like immunity, social distancing, and borders. In Spain, to decide whom they treat medically, they are even using the term of "social value". The vocabulary is based in the logic of sovereignty, in the right to let die. We are facing this epidemic within the frame of the rule of the State. We are subjected to the decisions of our governments on how to handle the situation and the consequences we will face will depend on the State we belong. It is scary. It is bio politics in a global dimension. We are confined in our countries; we will need to obey the decisions they make. Here we are in semi isolation. We are at the level of what they call "healthy distance". People are recommended to stay home, but commences, transport and lots of works remains open. We are free of circulation but, as you said, there is fear in the eyes of everyone

you cross in the street. Yesterday we went to the bakery and an old man said hi to Rita as he touched her head. I had to control myself not to shout at him. The rhetoric of contagion is now installed in me.

You are right and we need to think in the consequences of seeing others as carriers of the disease. The experience of social distancing can create a more selfish society. When we had a similar experience with the swine flu at the end of the 2000's it took almost nothing to be back at normal, but now it's going to be long and the effects can be more complicated to modify. We are longing but we fear the others. Anyone, even oneself, can be the carrier of the virus.

We are all thinking in what is to come. But I'm exhausted. It seems that even if the world is in a stand still there is a refusal to pause. There is this rush to keep productive, creative, working. It is overwhelming. It is the fear to stop or is the capitalist system—that is embedded in us— looking how to survive?

Rita school is closed; the University I teach as well. We are in isolation but I need to work remotely. I need to work at the same time that I need to take care of Rita. And also I need to cook, to clean, and to maintain myself sane.

The division between productive and reproductive labour is getting even deeper in this crisis. There is this urge to keep producing as if to produce and sustain life was not enough. The other day, some colleagues, opened a chat to see how we were. Immediately they started sharing how much they are working, how they are using new platforms for teaching, how they are writing new articles and reading lots and lots of books. I had been playing with Rita—cooking and cleaning— from sunrise to dawn. I was furious, and even if I was concerned about their judgment, I said to them: "I did the garden, I bake a cake and tried not to shout too much to my kid. I guess is also work."

I'm very lucky. Not only I have a secure income, I'm also doing this "isolation" with my mother and Rita's father. We are between houses and Rita is with the three of us. So I do have some time for work, it's not much but is a privilege. If you think on the millions of woman that are raising their children alone and with no economic stability in this situation, is overwhelming. I told Cuauhtémoc that I couldn't cope with the rhythm of the seminar; he said that he knew my situation and that he could run the conversation, but that we needed to keep going as "show must go on". It really needs to go on?

People are imposing a new normality as similar as it was before. I had never had so much access to books, movies, free yoga, Pilates and ballet tutorials. Classes, even for kindergarten, are on line. So they can have the same education as before. Only, of course, if you have Internet access, devices —one for each member of the family—, and electricity.

It is as if we need to have the same rhythm as before. As if there was a way not to lose —time, access, money, freedom—. I can recognize the anxiety of the void, of the silence, of the nothingness. But maybe, this crisis is also a moment to assume that the work of care, of others and ourselves, is important. It sustains life, and sometimes it takes all we have. Maybe the anxiety of productivity is part of capitalism, maybe this fake normality is its way for capitalism to survive and return reinforced.

It is also surprising how the isolation has brought the most conventional structure of the family. No one that I know opened the discussion if we should share isolation or make it collectively. By the moment I realized, everyone was with their nuclear families. Mostly partners with kids. Elders apart. Single people alone. No one questioned that maybe it was better to create other arrangements.

I decided to share the risk of contamination with my mother and Rita's father. It is not only that it would be very hard for me to be in lockdown with Rita in my flat but also is a way to be and help my mother that hates to be alone, and to support Jota that is so far from his family and that by now has lost his pay job.

I know lots of people are trying strategies of solidarity and it gives me a great hope but what is evident is that both the State and the family are the main actors in this crisis. They will determine our life in the months to come.

I guess that is why I also wanted you to stay. I wanted other forms of being in this situation and to share life. I won't lie; it is also the phantasy of me being your home. We have had talked a lot about that, and that is not what we are to each other. But I keep falling in the tramp.

Today was hard, but had very lovely moments. We did some coloring books. I had not paint like that since I was a kid. Also, I chased Rita until I couldn't breathe, and heard her horrible singing all the way back home. It is the sweetest sound in the world.

Rita has stooped saying that you can stay and live with us. Now she has assumed that you are gone. Today she said that when the pandemic is over we'll go to visit you in South Africa, that she will take her blue dress. It is scary not to know when, or if, we are going to see each other again.

I need to go to sleep. Tomorrow will be another day.

Love.

H

Dear Simon,

I'm sorry that it took me too long to respond. I have been somehow lost. As I told you in my last letter I felt social distancing getting into me.

I was angry and I couldn't work. Besides all the housework I have to do, I couldn't think or write. I needed to do a text on exhumations but every time I tried I ended felling sick. I felt like I had nothing to say and there was a fury because of that. I fought with Cuauhtémoc and Jota, I felt unseen, unheard. As the things that very clumsily I was trying to say were stupid. I felt incompetent. I knew I couldn't but I wished I could use all the work I have done to think the present. I was spinning around so I couldn't do anything but stop.

I have been thinking a lot in what we said about home. How home is for me some sort of belonging, more as an affection to people than to a territory. Now that form of a place is hard to sustain. People are distant, even if we keep in touch everybody is trying to cope with isolation and sometimes we do it by withdrawal.

I always have had the need of the others, for many years it was a burden, as I only existed in the reflected image that the others gave of myself. I have been working on that and somehow it kind of settle in the new network of affections that I have created with my friends. A community beyond a partner and my family, I thought it was enough. But somehow now that has showed the limit again, I feel homeless without that certainty of others. I felt like disappearing, so I decided to disappear, to take some distance.

Little by little I feel calmer, somehow I have been able to work. In between playing with Rita or cleaning the house I have been starting to write. I changed the tone. I

went inside me. I'm not trying to be very clever, just to write from here I can. The ideas are not very coherent, and there is no way to make any argument. I am far of being able to make an analysis of what is going on or what is about to come, but I found in my own testimony—as banal and privileged as it is in the given situation—a place to be.

The other day I had a very interesting talk with Cuauhtémoc. He knew I was losing it, so he asked me what I was doing to overcome the days. I said that I talked to you, that I was with Rita. He said no, that he wanted to know what I was doing that didn't involve anyone else. I told him that I didn't understand. He said that, for example, he goes everyday through his watches and decide which one to wear, that he select a pen to work, that spends time with one of his book that he haven't been able to read or that has meant something for him in the past. I went silent for a while. Then, I told him that I got a new ring. And my voice changed as I was talking about it.

It's a massive silver ring with a blue stone, it's very heavy and I like the feeling of its weight in my hand. Every few minutes I go back to stare at it, and somehow give me some strength and calm. After the conversation with Cuauhtémoc I started to pay attention to the things I stare everyday. The painting you left in my house after your exhibition, the drawing you made to explain me primitive accumulation, the diagram you did for my class in which says "For Helena with Love"; the painting of some nude breasts that hang in my room that Melanie gave me for my 36 birthday; the drawing of the volcano that Marcos gave me as I felt in love with it at the moment I saw it; the drawing of people marching that was the image of the program I run when I worked in the museum and that Francis gave me as a wedding present. The blue ceramic I got in China, the wooden Olga and Trotsky that we got when we went to Trotsky house to see the video in which he take care of his rabbits. Also, the clay figures of Maruch Mendez the tsostil artist that we meet in Chiapas. One is mine and one is yours, but we decide that they should be together until the next time we meet. All those objects some how helps now to find a place. Those are my amulets. Simple things that stand for a time that is gone but is still present somehow.

I don't know if I'm doing better but at least I don't feel lost. I have taken some distance with people. I'm trying not to depend on their confirmation; I'm trying not to disappear if they are gone. With some, that distance might change when circumstances are different, but with others I guess it will be ok to let it be. Somehow is

very hard for me to let go people, but sometimes distance can be a form of relation as well. I guess. I don't know yet.

I keep seeing the picture they took me in the women protest on the 8th of March in 2020. The friend that took the picture send it to me a few weeks back. I am standing in a stall watching the mass flow. We were thousands of women together protesting. Publicly gathering to complain about feminicides, about violence against women. Making a claim about how the conversation needs to change.

Being a mother has changed me completely. I became a feminist. Most of my work now is based on thinking how to change some structures, the most important for me being the division between reproductive and productive labor. Feminism here was taking all the public space, there were lots of forms, not without contradictions, but it was —and it is— an important conversation to have. Women are angry and there are good reasons for that. But that has also made it single side. Either you are with the movement, with all the positions and blind spots, or you are against it. I'm trying to think form another perspective.

I'm not going to tell anyone, for sure not any young woman, which is the battle that they need to fight and how. But for me, is also important to think from where it comes all this structure. I don't want to target men for being men —although they must shout up and listen—. But I also want to understand the damage, the subjectivities that has bring all this violence. In Mexico, as in South Africa, is brutal. The collapse of dominant male subjectivities —because poverty, the lack of work, the shift into a neoliberal economic— has open a massive violence. Men, who used to be in control, don't have any power but their emotional and physical and force. And they use it, and they harm, endlessly.

I'm not trying to justify it, it must stop, but I think the only way to deal with it will be confronting the system that created those subjectivities. To change men, and also women, we need to change the forms of production that has created those roles, expectations, and subjectivities. It will take time and we know, there is an urgency that can't wait.

I see that picture and hope to be back in the streets soon, to feel the force of the tide. I miss that happiness, that feeling of endless possibilities.

After isolation there will be a lot of work to do. I can't imagine the violence that this crisis will bring. Not only because the confinement, but also because all the poverty, anxiety, and fear. That always has brought more violence into women.

In the mean time I'm trying to find my place. To wait and see, and hope that when all this is over I will still be. I don't know if me, but something like a living thing.

I think on that and remembered what Ocean Vuong said about survival:

Sometimes, when I'm careless, I think survival is easy: you just keep moving forward with what you have, or what's left of what you were given, until something changes –or you realize, at last, that you can change without disappearing, that all you had to do was wait until the storm passes you over and you find that —yes— your name is still attached to a living thing.<sup>1</sup>

The pictures you send me every morning helps me to go through the day. Thank you.

H

Dear Simon,

It has been raining a lot. There is a hurricane. I stopped this evening to buy something to eat and got into the car, while I was driving I tried to push the brake but the sole of my shoe was wet so I slip and lost control of the speed for a second. I pushed harder and was able to stop. The street was empty so it was fine, but the feeling in my body made me remember that I have been dreaming a lot with situations in which I lost control of the car. Somehow I am driving and I forget which pedal is the brake and which the acceleration one. I panic every time and wake. It takes a lot to be able to sleep again. In the last few months it has been hard to sleep. When Rita is with her father I take sleeping pills. I am exhausted and it's hard to rest, to fully rest.

After two months of the lockdown I felt stronger and thought I could handle some work, so I decide to go through with the soma summer program and organize some online conversations around social justice. One session every Thursday. It is a lot of work but what worries me is that it is draining me in a way I could not foresee. It is not only to prepare them but the level of exposition that they imply have created a lot of anxiety in me. They are close sessions on zoom transmitted live on YouTube,

so anyone can see them. That was important, to share with as many people as we could, but has also put me in a place that was unknown to me. To be seen for someone that I cannot see. They see my house, my intimate spaces and that is so weird. I found a corner that I feel ok that people sees, there are some paintings but they are far enough so people only see some stains of color, mostly blue. I don't want that people see neither my house nor my library; it is so pretentious how intellectuals are showing their libraries in all online events. As if having a library demonstrates some authority. So I prefer a white wall with lines and colors. It's my dining room and the chair is so uncomfortable, so I move every two seconds. That and that I hate to see me in the screen. I just learned how to avoid watching oneself. I hope that helps.

It's that exposure but also I been bouncing on my own representation. The first two conversations were with Cuauhtémoc and Marcelo, they are very well know and audiences went to the sky, at least for the kind of things that we do. We are very close, they are my friends, but somehow I felt uncomfortable talking with them in this public format. Like I was just a host. Somehow what it shows is that I feel uncomfortable with myself. It has been hard to find my place right now, my voice. It is good to have something to do right now, so days don't pass one after another in a void but also has put a lot of pressure on me. A pressure to be fine, that, at least it seems that I am doing fine, and the truth is that sometimes I don't.

I am exhausted. It has been more than four months in this strange isolation. Schools are closed and even now that lockdown has relaxed, cases are still raising and we are avoiding as much as we can to go out and see people. Social distancing is still the better way to avoid contagion but it's getting harder as time goes by. I see my mother and Rita's father, that allows me to be able to do some work, but also creates some pressure to try to keep the sphere to only us. It is hard to take risks, as seeing more people is today a risk, because any slip can mean the contact with the virus, and no one knows how it will affect a body, can be mild or bad, but even with a mild sickness no one knows the seriousness of the aftereffects. But it is hard to keep it completely closed. The domestic worker is going to my mother's house — as she couldn't handle the workhouse anymore— and Jota is seeing her girlfriend. I see some of my friends with social distancing from time to time, and sometimes without it, but the guilt is overwhelming. I feel sometimes in a crossroad, either I see only my mother, and I have all the help and support that she gives me or I don't see her and I can be more "free" to take the risks that I want but I don't get her aid.



And I feel that is impossible to take the decision. It will be impossible for me to work if she is not there, but sometimes I feel that I can't breathe.

Since I started working on motherhood I focused on the importance of assuming that mothering is a collective work, one that can go beyond the family. I raised Rita in kinship relationships, or at least I have tried. And now we are stuck at the family structure again, and that has brought a lot of tensions on the division of time, on the economic dynamic, in sharing time again together. I know I am lucky to at least have this; otherwise it will be completely impossible for me. But it is suffocating. How to keep insisting that child's upbringing goes beyond the family with social distancing?

With every day that passes it is more evident that this process will be long. No one knows how long, but it is clear that it is far from over. We will need to learn to live with uncertainty and assume that risk will be part of our lives. But I feel so insecure, so vulnerable; so scared that it is hard to take risks. I know I need to do it for the sake of Rita and mine, but I paralyze every time that I need to take a decision. I feel like Bartleby, every time I am in a crossroad the only thing that seems possible to me is: "I would prefer not to"

It is so weird that we can't travel. In the way we used to live, it was always for granted that we could move. Now most borders are closed, only for some countries citizens and residents are allowed to move into places. South Africa remains inaccessible so we don't know when we will be able to see each other. It is hard but at the same time, this separation has given us the clarity that we want to be together. Now we know what it is like being apart. So we know that we want to be together. So we will wait.

It's a weird time, I feel like bouncing from one place to another, and I am tired. I won't pretend to aim for stability but maybe I can be like a spinning top, moving and unsteady, but having some core that allows to spiral within myself. I hope that at least that is at my reach. So I can dance as a spinning top.

H

Dear Simon,

It's been a long time without writing to you. We are in the day 200 or 201 of lock-down, I don't know exactly. It has been a lot and it is not even close to be over. I'm very tired, but I think I'm doing better. Somehow I have found some rhythm, some routine. Rita is with her father 3 days of the week so I'm starting to have some space to work, besides the cleaning and the moments of nothingness that I need to be.

I don't know what happened that made me feel better. Maybe the multiple conversations that helped to elaborate the situation and to understand something of what is going on or that I was able to write again. I finally finished a text they commissioned me for the São Paulo Biennale. It was not what they asked, I don't even know if they will publish it, but it is what I could do, and that is the only thing I can right now.

Having that moment of writing force me to think on the moment we are. I pushed myself to be situated, to take a stand. I guess I discovered that I had some tools at hand to make something of this time. In one of the picks of despair, there have been a few and I guess there will be more to come, I kind of remembered that I had been here before.

Walking outside my building in circles searching for some sunlight I felt a *déjàvù*. When Rita was born I was also in isolation. For more than three months I almost never left the house and I was worried about virus and bacteria. Almost no one came to visit, my mother and some of my friends did, but just once or twice during that time. I was with Rita's father and days went by a bit like this, with a feeling of uncertainty and exhaustion.

In fact, the first pair of masks I used during this pandemic were from when she was born. I got very sick with flu when I came back from the hospital. I still remember how cold I was at the operating room. I had to wear mask and use disinfectant gel during the first week home. I was so afraid that she got sick as well. We sterilized everything several times a day. She was so new and so fragile that we took care of having distance with other people. I guess that was the first time I ever put attention to surfaces, to people, to possible transmission and contagion. We were not obsessed with that but we were careful, and lots of the activities of the day were around cleaning. Even I got a dryer machine that sterilizes clothes.

I also remembered the feeling of loneliness, of being broken and lost. It was different from now. I was the one that had been left behind, now all we are. But that sensation of not being completely me is quite similar. That was the first time I had

to deal with the fact that I couldn't do my work; that I couldn't be out with friends doing the things I liked. I was home, stuck at home. And it was overwhelming. It took me few weeks to feel comfortable here. I had to gain spaces and times. I had to learn to take care of Rita at the same time that I took care of myself.

In some senses was even harder. I did not recognized my body, I was big and had milk in my breast. I breastfeed Rita and it hurt. I did not sleep much or anything. Rita's father was with her for several hours at night so I didn't collapsed. But I was on the limit of it most of the time. Of course it's very different from now but that was the first time I had the feeling of being isolated. At that time took me a while, as now, to find myself in that condition, but I did.

At that time my doctor set few rules I had to follow for my recovery. One was that no matter what happened I had to take a shower before 10 am, the other was that I needed to have one hour for myself, nothing related with Rita, work or the house. He told us that to Jota, and me so we followed the instructions. I thought the first rule was to be careful with the wound of my C-section, so it didn't got infected. After some time I realized it was a strategy for not losing my mind. Even now I take a shower in the morning, no matter if I go out or not. I need to mark that days go by. Also, I have been trying to have some time for myself. Take a walk, take the sun or just do nothing.

Remembering that time I felt some strength, some calm. I had been there before and I learned how to survive. I remembered how I reinvented myself so, I thought, maybe, I can do it again.

When Rita was born I had to learn new forms of being. It was not possible to remain the same so I needed to change, to adjust. I had to establish other relationship with work, I had to assume that I couldn't work as I did nor I could have the same rhythms. It was very hard to concentrate for long periods of time when I went back to work; I felt a lot of anxiety for being so fragmented and slow. It was in that moment that I started to think about motherhood. Once I called Cuauhtémoc crying saying that I couldn't think. He said to me that if I couldn't think maybe I should think about that. Not why I wasn't able to think but in that experience. It was the start of what I am doing now, of what I have been trying to think with you.

For the first year of Rita's life I didn't went out a lot. I didn't drink or smoke. I didn't travel. I was home most of the time. I saw less my friends and people I loved, and it was ok. We found forms of being close, as we are doing now.

These months have been hard and painful but it has been important to realize that I have some tools to go through this time. That some of the knowledge that can help me comes from there, from mothering. There is some knowledge that we have and some of it comes from the work of care. The transformations that one needs to do in order to care for a new being. We will need to have that in mind to go through this. Kids or not kids, the important thing is to let things change, to let those changes to hit and be able to assume other set of relationships with the world and with oneself.

I don't know, I think it was important to take what is at hand, and what I have is the work of care.

Love,

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<sup>1</sup> Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, Nueva York, Penguin Press, 2019, p. 116, available at <https://www.are.na/block/11490373>.