More-than-human kinship against proximal loneliness: practising emergent multispecies care with a dog in a pandemic and beyond

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Abstract
Dogs are here to live with, not just to think with. In this autoethnographic essay, I share my experience of loneliness and more-than-human kinship while being in lockdown with my dog, Frank, in our small flat in Edinburgh due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I open with our histories and how we have come to be kin in order to make our positionalities explicit. I then tell three stories that illustrate how our lives—and our bodies—are being shaped by the current pandemic, addressing the ways in which its contribution to my loneliness in COVID-induced lockdown manifested in our everyday life. Engaging with existing scholarship on emotional/personal, social and cultural loneliness, I theorise that life in lockdown suffers from a new type of loneliness: proximal loneliness. Then, I build on the concept of response-ability to argue that multispecies kinship helps to alleviate feelings of proximal loneliness through emergent practices that make us responsible—care and respond—to one another. I contend that even in these unprecedented and viral times that have come to elicit profound feelings of loneliness and despair for many, the repertoire of our multispecies emergent practices that may help us through the difficulties of proximal loneliness continues to exist and grow with shared response-abilities of our kinship across the species boundaries.

Keywords
Autoethnography, COVID-19, dogs, emergent practices, kinship, lockdown, loneliness, more-than-human anthropology, multispecies ethnography, pandemic, response-ability

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Kinship with dogs

I was never one to have too many close human friends, but I was fortunate to have a childhood that always had dogs and puppies crawling about. This was largely thanks to halmoni (my maternal grandmother), who always had at least three dogs at any given time. I remember that at one point, the dogs all had a litter of puppies at the same time, increasing the canine population in her care to something like fifteen. These dogs were first and foremost working dogs, guarding the grounds and chasing pests away from the garden that blossomed with fragrant fruits and flowers every summer in the outskirts of Seoul. However, JJ, my favourite out of all of them, was spoiled rotten as halmoni humoured my love for this clever corgi-mix.

But things changed rather suddenly with migration. My ties to these dogs were severed by over 10,000 km between Seoul and Toronto. And tragedies compounded soon after the transatlantic move: in less than a year post migration, halmoni passed away from cancer that she had kept hidden from the whole family. She was the linchpin holding the family together. With her gone, the family scattered. And with no one willing or able to take care of them, all the dogs were given away to acquaintances or relinquished to a rescue. I was told that JJ ran away before she could be sent away. And just like that, all the dogs that shaped my childhood disappeared.

But in what initially felt like a sad, dog-less life in Canada, I learned to befriend other people’s dogs: in middle school, my best friend had a golden retriever puppy who was a rambunctious ball of energy. My next-door neighbour had an old Shetland sheepdog who loved to follow me around despite her owner’s desperate call to return. Even when I moved out from home to Montreal as a teenager for my undergraduate education, I continued the tradition of befriending other people’s dogs with my first landlord’s very senior Italian greyhound who never stopped shivering despite wearing a sweater at all times, as well as a neighbour’s gentle husky who I got to take on walks sometimes. And in 2017, when I returned to Canada after a year in London, I finally saw an opportunity to bring home my own dog – and I made sure to take it.

As a stray dog from Sochi, Russia, Frank was rescued by the shelter workers there as a small puppy at around two to three months old. He was found with his mum, who shares the same cheeky facial expression that Frank often displays when he is up to something that I have yet to become aware of (usually, it means he has hidden his chews between the sofa cushions). I adopted Frank when he was two years old through an American charity that works with the shelter in Russia. He was flown from Sochi to Morristown, New Jersey as international cargo, staying overnight at a volunteer’s home to recover from the long flight. The next morning, he was transported on a small private plane by a volunteer pilot to Niagara, New York, where I picked him up by car. Finally, he was driven to Toronto, where I was living at the time. He crossed multiple international borders to find his ‘home’, just as my family and I once did.

As a former stray and a rescue who spent the early years of his life in a shelter, he was not accustomed to living in a home, not to mention an apartment building. Our relationship was clunky at first. He marched to the rhythm of his own beat and I couldn’t keep up; I often misread his tempo instructions and we both got frustrated. But connected firmly
with the leash, the lure of dried liver treats and the affectively charged space and time we shared, we learned to create and stick to a polyphonic yet harmonious routine with one another as the basis of what became our kinship.

A little over a year post adoption, Frank and I relocated to Edinburgh, UK for me to embark on a PhD programme. I anticipated a wave of loneliness to sweep over me: I was not going to have any flatmates, and I knew no one in Edinburgh prior to the move. And I had no idea how Scottish culture was going to interact with my already-complicated Korean-Canadian cultural identity. But I found consolation and courage in the fact that I didn’t have to go at it alone this time; I had Frank with me.

In the exceptionally dog-friendly climate of Edinburgh, Frank flourished. As I was able to take him to different shops, cafes, pubs and restaurants in the city, Frank and I started sharing a wider scope of spaces and in a wider variety of ways. And I, in being (and becoming) with Frank, managed to survive the kinds of loneliness that I initially worried so much about. He kept me company, helped me make friends with other dog people (see: Serpell, 2000) and, being a border collie (or at least a dog that looks like a border collie – I do not know his exact genealogy), fitted right into the Scottish aesthetic and culture. He became such a significant part of my life in Edinburgh that he became the inspiration behind my research project. Once my ethnographic fieldwork began, he also accompanied me to interviews, walks, hikes and pet supply shops as my research associate. He became a prolific director and producer of anthrozoological data in his own right.

Then, about six months into my fieldwork, a novel virus, COVID-19, which neither of us could have possibly foreseen, entered our field site, changing not only my fieldwork plans but also the very structures and affects (Haraway, 2012: 305) of our everyday life. It added a new, unexpected melody to our routinised harmony, throwing us off the groove of our well-practised daily rehearsal.

This article is comprised of autoethnographic reflections on the effects of COVID-19 pandemic and on my perception of loneliness in lockdown with Frank. First, I explore different typologies of loneliness – emotional/personal, social and cultural – that have been theorised before by Weiss (1973) and Sawir and colleagues (2008) and situate them in my family’s experiences of loneliness. I then share three short ‘quarantine stories’ from my fieldnotes to highlight affective moments of what I call ‘proximal’ loneliness – a type of loneliness that stems from the lack of physical closeness and contact to a specific reference, one that makes us think differently about other forms of loneliness as well as loneliness in a time untouched by COVID-19. I trace the affective and bodily consequences of my cross-species kinship with Frank in these viral times through the emergent multispecies practices that we have developed in the pandemic.

In sharing these specific, situated stories of our kinship, it is my hope to engage with and expand on our understanding and practice of kinship and response-ability – ‘praxis of care and response’ (Haraway, 2012: 302) – that extends beyond and across the species boundaries. Furthermore, I wish to make explicit that the consideration of nonhuman beings who cohabit the world with humans concerns a feminist analysis of loneliness. Thinking about loneliness through a feminist lens is to do so with deliberate reflection on ethics, questioning and altering hierarchical practices and conceptualisations in the
world around us. In line with this endeavour, I explore some ethical and affective implications and consequences of loneliness for dogs, who are entangled in manifold and multiform aspects and spheres of life with humans, in and beyond the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Loneliness and kinship before COVID-19**

As a misfit daughter of first-generation South Korean migrants to Canada, I had a complicated and lasting relationship with loneliness long before the pandemic era. By migrating, ‘one ceases to belong to the world one left behind, and does not yet belong to the world in which one has nearly arrived’ (Grinberg and Grinberg, 1989: 23), stuck in an in-between where uncertainties abound. This migration-induced liminality infected everyone in the family with loneliness: umma (my mum) gave up her rewarding job as an anaesthesiologist and suddenly became a stay-at-home mum who was tasked with raising two young children in Toronto, where she knew no one. Appa (my dad), staying behind in Seoul as the family’s only source of income, found himself living alone in an empty house that once sheltered the whole family. My little sister and I, eight and eleven year olds at the time of our migration, were confused and frightened, yanked from our existing friendships and other support networks, however childish and immature they may have been, in Korea.

Weiss (1973) theorised that there are two types of loneliness that arise from different kinds of absence or deficit: the first kind is *emotional, or personal*, loneliness, an affective response to the lack of intimate attachments to dearly loved ones such as a romantic partner or a very close friendship. It is important that these intimate attachments are tied to specific people rather than the kind of relationship. For example, recently bereaved widows and widowers would suffer from emotional loneliness even if they still had other family and friends (Weiss, 1973).

The second kind is *social* loneliness, which originates from the lack of social networks, which ‘provide a base for social activities, for outings and parties and get-togethers with people with whom one has much in common’ (Weiss, 1973: 150). For example, in a study of couples who newly moved to Boston, wives reported experiencing loneliness even though they were in a loving relationship with their husbands. While the husbands could help with their personal loneliness, they were not able to address their wives’ need to be a part of a social group where they could form meaningful friendships (Weiss, 1973). As both types of loneliness were conceptualised as a deficit of necessary interpersonal relationships, Weiss contended that the provision of those necessary social relationships could reduce or eliminate loneliness.

Sawir et al. added *cultural* loneliness to this discussion, defining it as a type of loneliness that is ‘triggered by the absence of the preferred cultural and/or linguistic environment’ (2008: 171). Their research on the experiences of loneliness among international students in Australia showed that cultural differences and culture shock that stemmed from these differences, obstacles to building new social networks such as language barriers and difficulties in handling problems that arose due to unforeseen circumstances or infrastructural or bureaucratic issues in a new cultural environment all led to experiences
of cultural loneliness (Sawir et al., 2008: 161). Cultural loneliness was painful and frustrating, leading to other unwelcome feelings such as disappointment, regret and homesickness.

Without much personal, social or cultural support network for at least the first few years in Canada, my family and I experienced all three kinds of loneliness in our lives, although to widely varying degrees. My parents’ personal loneliness came from the fact that they were no longer able to live together, while my sister and I suddenly had only one parent to live with. Umma, my sister, and I also all suffered from profound social loneliness from not knowing anyone in the new country and traumatising cultural loneliness from systemic, institutional and language barriers (although to different extents).

As our loneliness affected us in different ways, we coped with it in different ways, too. My parents adopted the ‘positive solitude’ (Sawir et al., 2008: 166) mode of coping, keeping to themselves and (barely) learning to manage the loneliness often on their own. In hindsight, it was clear that they were too overwhelmed to care about, not to mention address, their loneliness: appa, he buried himself in work – so much work. On top of running his clinic where he worked six days a week for as many hours as necessary, he regularly attended medical seminars and conferences in the evenings.

Umma, who unquestionably had the biggest pile of new responsibilities, found herself having to navigate the Canadian bureaucracies, cope with racism, tend to all the chores around the house, raise two kids and learn English at the same time. For the seven years she spent with never enough hours in a day or enough energy in her body, migration was a trauma. To this day, seventeen years post migration, she describes the experience of migration as ‘hellish, miserable and scary’. She shudders at the countless exasperating and fearful memories speckled with fair doses of racism. She readily admits that it was a deeply isolating experience that put her off ever migrating to another country again.

My sister, faring the best out of the four of us, quickly turned to new friendships, easing her loneliness through integration. This was anticipated given her young age and the assumed malleability that came with it, as well as her extroverted disposition. As her English improved rapidly, she made friends with many of her classmates. She seemed to have adjusted to our new lives in Canada seamlessly, until she decided to move back to Seoul to attend a prestigious international high school where she continued to rely on friends to ease her loneliness.

In these ways, multiple and often overlapping kinds of loneliness permeated our lives for years, working with countless other emotions to shape us as people and as a family over time. Appa became someone who is always working or thinking about work, umma became someone very invested in challenging whiteness, my sister became someone who I sadly didn’t get much opportunity to create new memories with outside of our childhood. And I, evidently, became a crazy dog lady.

We’re all conscious of our loneliness, too. Recently, I told umma that I loved hearing Frank’s footsteps coming towards me, what we call the ‘pap, pap, pap’, that it was possibly my favourite sound. She responded, ‘you must be really lonely’ – not in a mocking or condescending way, but in a genuinely sad, sorry way. She wasn’t talking about a moment or a phase of loneliness. Rather, she was describing me as a lonely person, a
person who can be characterised by her loneliness that has accumulated throughout life post migration, throughout my pursuit of higher education away from home and in three different countries, while not having lived in the same continent as the rest of my family for a decade. What once felt so acutely painful and uncomfortable has become the norm over time, and loneliness became a fact of life, as if time smoothed the jagged edges that used to cut into us in visceral moments of personal, social and cultural loneliness.

But with COVID-19 and the new world it brought about, the shapes of loneliness became even more varied and amplified by the loneliness of others around us, compounding with existing kinds of loneliness as well as other affects. And this time, as the following stories show, Frank was implicated, playing an unprecedented role as my canine companion in the experience of loneliness in the pandemic.

Quarantine stories

A lonely apocalypse

On what seemed like a regular day in March 2020, the UK government finally caved to the pressure and ordered a nationwide lockdown as they probably should have done some time before. Everything except essential services was to be closed. People were told to stay at home, and to go outside only for necessities, and as infrequently as possible, while keeping a distance of at least two metres from each other. At 8 p.m. the same day, I found myself at the neighbourhood park, taking Frank on his evening walk. It was strange to be outside on such a beautiful evening – skies clear enough to see the Orion and the Dipper – with no other dogs and their humans in sight. Yasmin, the red golden retriever who still felt unsure about whether she liked Frank or not. Trudy, the long-haired chihuahua who definitely never liked Frank and made sure to let him know. Marjorie, the young escape artist lurcher who had known Frank since her puppyhood. Where were they all?

Frank quickly decided that there was no real purpose to being at the park when there weren’t other dogs there: once he finished doing his business with the tender caress of the not-so-chilly-anymore spring breezes, he walked straight back to me instead of venturing into the bushes that he had once loved exploring so much. We headed home as a depressed quadruped and a disappointed biped walking at a perfectly coordinated pace. Exiting the park, we ended up having to walk on the road instead of the pavement in order to keep the compulsory two-metre distance from other pedestrians, who either avoided eye contact altogether or shared a quick and apologetic glance. Frank broke our lockstep, as he didn’t understand why we were walking on the road and tried to pull me towards the pavement, and I had to persuade him with a treat to walk next to me. He didn’t understand why we couldn’t walk close enough to other people for him to catch a quick whiff, or why no one asked me if they could pet him.

I realised that neither Frank nor I have ever experienced this specific spatial arrangement before – walking down the middle of the road without a single car in sight – and my mind took me to a fictional zombie-apocalyptic place: the scene from the poster of I Am Legend, where Will Smith walks down the street with his loyal companion, Samantha the
German shepherd. In this moment, Frank and I were Samantha and Will Smith, alone together in this viral world that pried me – and by extension, Frank – away from other humans.

**So close, yet so far**

Jasper and Bella – Frank’s best friend and his human, respectively – live just down the street from us. We used to spend time together regularly: we would go for a long dog walk, come back to Bella’s flat, order pizza and hang out. Bella and I have a lot in common: we are both Asian dog-owning women from North America, in Edinburgh for our postgraduate education. Because of these commonalities that we share in our identities and experiences, we became fast friends.

The dogs also have a lot in common. Both with collie blood coursing through their veins, they are unbelievably well-matched in their high energy levels. They would play for hours, wrestling and play-biting with unending enthusiasm that could only be interrupted by necessary water breaks (or ‘necessary’ pizza crust breaks). They are also not very ‘promiscuous’ dogs, only making friends with a select few dogs who met their demanding standards.

About a month into the lockdown, Frank and I ran into Jasper and Bella at Blackford Hill, one of our favourite dog-walking spots in our neighbourhood. As I was taking in the coconutty smell of the bumblebee-yellow gorse that covered the expansive landscape unfolding before me, I spotted Bella, standing next to her car at the top of the hill. I waved, and she saw us right away, waving back with a bright smile on her face. Jasper got a more enthusiastic hello than a wave: upon realising that it was Jasper and not just an unknown dog, Frank, who is usually not fussed about other dogs, galloped over to him with astonishing speed and delight. His soft triangular ears flopped in the wind as all four of his paws worked in coordination to levitate his body off the ground. Bella and I watched the dogs’ reunion with a parental kind of joy as they sniffed each other to verify each other’s identity and ran off together in the field to sniff tufts of overgrown grass, undoubtedly covered with scents of other animals.

Bella and I walked in the same direction, but metres apart. We had to speak louder than usual to make sure our voices could carry through the distance between us. As we strolled around the field, the dogs were busy unsuccessfully hunting a vole or a mouse with their snouts in olfactory hyperdrive under the long, knotted grass. A month must be a very long time in dog time, and they were determined to make up for lost time.

As we parted ways, Bella said ‘it’s so sad that I can’t even hug you guys’. I then realised that just as it had been a whole month since Frank got to hang out with his friend, it had been a month since I last went to a cafe with them – since I last went to a cafe with them, since I last grabbed a drink with them, since I did anything with them except video-calling them from my home. Even though I have always been an introvert and even though I keep in touch with my loved ones online, I found myself longing for the things I used to take for granted: sharing food with my friends, cheers-ing our drinks at a pub and giving them a warm hug goodbye.
**Dinner on a screen**

With eight (sometimes nine) hours between us, umma and I often time-travelled through FaceTime, Apple’s proprietary video/audio calling app. We usually chatted on early afternoons Edinburgh-time, and early-to-late evenings Seoul-time. When I called her on a Friday noon Edinburgh-time in mid-May 2020, I caught her, appa and my sister all having dinner together. As the country managed to flatten the curve of the spread of the virus, the South Korean government had not issued a full, strict lockdown like the UK, and instead opted for a ‘soft’ lockdown. Everything stayed open and operational, provided that everyone practised necessary precautions, such as social distancing and mask-wearing. Because of this, my family has been having a very different pandemic experience from mine in Edinburgh, where everything except essential services has been shut down for over two months at the time of the FaceTime call.

Over the dinner table that was covered to the last inch with delectable dishes, my family started chatting. Appa had just gotten back from work, happy that the trains were back up and running on a regular schedule again, which meant that he no longer had to drive to and from work. Umma, worried that I still hadn’t been able to secure any masks, grabbed a pen and paper and asked me what I wanted in the next care package along with the masks that appa was able to get from the hospital he works at. My sister made sure to give me a tour of all the food on the table in detail: pressure-cooked rice, appa’s braised lotus root, umma’s fishcake stew, two kinds of kimchi (the radish kind and the cabbage kind) and the pièce de résistance, a beautifully presented lemon cake for dessert. Momentarily and virtually transported to the dining table through the screen, I have never been more grateful for the advancement of video-calling technology since the lockdown came into effect.

But even though I could spend time with my family through technological mediation, I couldn’t participate in this meaningful space. This feeling was echoed in Frank, who was not excited at all about the dinner table full of food on the screen of my phone. No ‘crazy eyes’ that he gets when he gets really excited (dilated pupils, wide-open eyes), no cheeky sniffing of the air around the food as he does when I’m having my food in the same room as him. Frank and I just weren’t there, and unfortunately, being there was the only way to really experience ‘family dinner’ as I had once known. A small but sharp pang in my chest reminded me of the 5000 miles between Edinburgh and Seoul. Imagining the mouth-watering smell of my family’s dinner, I felt a sudden urge to browse through the catalogue of Korean dramas on Netflix – something that umma and I used to do when she made the twenty-hour journey to visit me and Frank in Edinburgh.

**Proximal loneliness and emergent practices in the COVID-19 era**

The three stories I shared above exhibit a kind of loneliness that doesn’t quite fit into the categories of personal/emotional, social or cultural loneliness. Loneliness in a pandemic
is a distinctive kind of loneliness, one I would like to call proximal loneliness. Rooted in the Latin word ‘proximus’, the superlative form of ‘prope’, ‘proximal’ has multiple meanings. Not to be confused with ‘proximate’, which means nearby or adjacent, ‘proximal’ means ‘closer to the point of attachment’ in anatomy and ‘closer to the speaker’ in linguistics. It refers to the nearness to a specific something or someone. Proximal loneliness, then, stems not from the lack of relationships and networks, but rather from the physical limitations placed on the ways in which one can interact and communicate with one’s existing and cherished network. It is a kind of loneliness prompted by the lack of physical proximity and by extension, the lack of the kinds of affective and sensory experiences only possible in proximity. That is, it is not that our loved ones have disappeared from our lives, but rather, that they are at least a few metres away from us – and usually much farther away, appearing only on our screens.

In this way, proximal loneliness is the consequence of the lack of corporeal interactions, the result of COVID-19’s severing of the affective-bodily circuits that used to connect human bodies to one another with the threat of viral contagion. Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote that ‘the act of relating is nothing if divorced from the spectacle of the world in which relations are found’ (1945: 135), and the COVID-19 pandemic is clearly no exception. With strict physical limitations on how humans must behave vis-a-vis one another in the public sphere, our human bodies – a ‘complex of differentiated and simultaneous relationships between distinct aspects of individual bodies’ (Lyon and Barbalet, 1994: 56) – became less materially and corporeally implicated in one another, as we could no longer share spaces in which worldly spectacles take place.

The affective consequences of proximal loneliness are varied, especially as it pierces through and threads the fabric of everyday life that is already woven with other types of loneliness as well as other complex yet mundane affects – frustration, sadness, anger, contentment, joy. These affects exist in volatile tension with one another, not only affecting ourselves but also affecting and being affected by others with whom we interact and engage. The virus and its dangers, then, produce and permeate proximal loneliness as a powerful and pervasive affect in the socially distant and quarantined life.

It is worth noting that the experience of proximal loneliness often occurred during rather ordinary activities even in these extraordinary times, even if it was because ordinary things were the only things we were permitted to do with our bodies in life under lockdown. This ordinary and embodied nature of proximal loneliness was perhaps what made it susceptible to sometimes synergistic and sometimes comorbid interactions with other everyday affects, adding to the existing affective complexity of life in the pandemic.

As exemplified in the first story, something as mundane as walking the dog could elicit proximal loneliness. I speculate that this is because while walking can actualise the possibilities in an environment through our bodies (de Certeau, 1984: 254), it can also make us aware of the interdictions in the given environment, such as the two-metre social distancing rule. Walking through the pandemic-struck streets reminded us with every step that we must distance ourselves from others, lest our closeness makes us fatally sick or curse us with the ability to make others fatally sick. In some ways, then, proximal loneliness can also coexist with feelings of safety and comfort in being distant, relief in the lack of proximity to potential carriers of the virus. Not only that, but as anti-Asian
sentiments cropped up due to COVID-19, staying away from others became not just an issue of potential contagion but of potential racially motivated violence. Proximal loneliness is hence highly political, and its political nature must be understood as entangled with its embodiedness.

The second story similarly illustrated that routine circumstances could call forth intense affects, but added another dimension to proximal loneliness: the ‘so close, yet so far’-ness, like Tantalus’ eternal punishment in the Underworld where he was made to stand in deep water that escaped him when he tried to drink, and beneath a branch of fruit tree that evaded his grasp when he tried to eat. It wasn’t just that he was thirsty and starving. It was that there was no escape from the cruelty of having good things right in front of his eyes but not being able to enjoy them – like the cruelty of having friends but not being able to hug them. This torturous and tantalising element of proximal loneliness further complicated loneliness as an affect. One of the many insights from thinking about the pandemic-induced proximal loneliness may be that loneliness is far from just a simple feeling of sadness or pain derived from isolation. Rather, it is a variegated composite of multiple affects, including different subcategories of loneliness, interacting together through our bodies.

The last story combined an ordinary occurrence of a family dinner and the tantalising cruelty and filtered it through a technological mediator to produce a sensory deficit, another trait of proximal loneliness. This aspect of proximal loneliness is, simply put, the feeling of ‘it’s not the same’. Even though we were able to see one another, talk and laugh, I felt that I was missing the essence of the family dinner: being there to help umma prepare the food and set the table, being able to smell and taste the food, experiencing the actual molecules in the food instead of the pixels of the video facsimile – the sensory, corporeal experiences that demand physical presence in order to experience wholly.

Technologically mediated communication, then, paradoxically brought about proximal loneliness by providing only a partial sensory and bodily experience without the senses that one can only experience in proximity, such as smell, taste and touch. It reminded me just how far apart we were, and just how far apart we had to stay for the foreseeable future. While this technologically evoked proximal loneliness was not exclusive to the pandemic, it was exacerbated by the pandemic and the uncertainties about the future that came with it. When will I be able to see them next? Will umma be able to come and see me again next year? The year after? The virus and the UK’s abysmal, irresponsible and incompetent response to the pandemic made it much more difficult to answer these once-simple questions, which added a sense of temporal precarity.

Proximal loneliness, then, is an exceptionally complicated – visceral, embodied, political, contradictory – kind of loneliness that is nebulous and ever-changing in its form depending on the physical circumstances in which it is situated. Sometimes, it manifests as pain in the heart, hollowness in the chest, welling of tears in the eyes. Sometimes, it manifests as a blend of emotions uncontrollably boiling over in a meltdown. And other times, it even manifests as comforting solitude away from the contagious world outside. But at the same time, it became (and is still becoming) a chronic, dull kind of loneliness as the lockdown and the need to adhere to social distancing measures
continued. The longer we go without saying hello to strangers we encounter on the pavement, the longer we go without hugging our friends and the longer we go without being able to travel – or even plan to travel – to be with our family abroad, the more chronic it will become, potentially taking on more numerous and unpredictable forms.

At the time of writing this very sentence in early March 2021, after almost a whole year in lockdown in the UK, we have seen myriad ways in which proximal loneliness governs our bodies and impels particular actions, resulting in a splattering of responses and responsibilities. Combined with other emotions pervasive in the prolonged lockdown and its resulting institutional measures and technological reconfigurations, many of us have become, to varying degrees, accustomed to the viral way of life. Terms like ‘Zoom meetings’ and ‘lockdown regulations’ don’t sound so strange or scary anymore. Attending virtual events on my laptop and the responsibilities that come with it – such as muting myself when not speaking to prevent potential echo or spillage of background noise – no longer require such deliberate thought. Masks found their place in every coat pocket along with travel-size bottles of hand sanitiser.

Once an unknown melody that disrupted our composition, COVID-19 has gradually found its way into the synchronised harmony that Frank and I share. It forced us to change the melodies and harmonies that we were used to, making us modify the rhythm and tunes of our behaviours. And with the gradual changes we make, our new, COVID-influenced behaviours have started to feel increasingly ‘normal’ with time, and have eventually become new habits, new emergent practices embodied in our human and canine flesh (see: Haraway, 2003).

These new habits are comprised of new techniques of the body, ‘the ways in which … men [sic] know how to use their bodies’ (Mauss, 1979: 50). For example, being on the road instead of the pavement for large portions of our walks is starting to feel normal. When my eyes receive the information that there is a pedestrian coming towards me metres away, I use my spine to twist my body to look both ways to make sure there is no car coming my way. I use my vocal cords to call Frank so that he stops to look at me while shortening his lead with my hands just in case he decides to walk forwards unexpectedly upon seeing a pigeon or a cat. I then step down to the road with my legs and feet in order to avoid breaching the social distancing measure with the oncoming pedestrian. In lockdown, my body has practised this action enough that it is now habituated; I don’t have to think so much in order to execute it.

I sense a kind of loneliness and its consequences in Frank, too: it was on a beautiful afternoon in mid- to late May 2020 that I first noticed that he was no longer pulling me back towards the pavement when we had to walk on the road. While I won’t pretend that it is possible for me know exactly what he is feeling or thinking, I have witnessed some changes in his behaviour and mood in lockdown that I (partially anthropocentrically and partially ethologically) understand as his experience of proximal loneliness. He has become more affectionate towards me than ever, yet more wary of other people and their dogs who we have had to physically avoid, sometimes very suddenly, for reasons that I couldn’t make intelligible to Frank. With reduced opportunities for canine socialisation in lockdown, he seemed to have decided that strangers and their dogs were now our enemies that we shouldn’t be so physically close to, enemies he should bark away. In this
way, he has become more reactive towards the anyone at the door, motorcycles, bicycles and joggers, but more playful and cheekier whenever he gets a chance to be with his (best and only) friend, Jasper. His sensory perceptions and bodily movements have changed post outbreak and in lockdown, and in turn have brought about changes to our sensibilities and responsibilities.

For example, in our COVID-infused environment and its sensibilities, the act of walking outdoors created different possibilities that Frank and I could actualise (de Certeau, 1984: 254). So, in the face of these new possibilities, we co-developed new techniques of the body in order to actualise the possibility of walking on the road for social distancing, which evoked proximal loneliness in both of us, though manifesting in different ways. While I’ve come to feel physically and emotionally distant from, as well as anxious with, those around me, Frank’s proximal loneliness has manifested as nerves around strangers. This has affected our care practices: while I felt cared for by Frank, who kept me company whenever we braved stepping out into the contagious air – and potentially violently racist – outdoors, I cared for him by engaging in training activities designed to help him understand that there was no need to bark at everything and everyone passing us. Connected by the leash and the lure of Frank’s favourite treats, our bodies thus on-goingly actualise and adapt to the different possibilities in this viral world, fulfilling our responsibilities to one another.

This is just one example from myriad other emergent practices that we have come to embody as techniques of our bodies since the start of the lockdown. Indeed, some of our indoor habits have changed as well. With more time than ever to practise due to the sheer number of hours I spend at home now, Frank has learned how to adjust his body around mine in such a way that we can now both enjoy a daily evening cuddle without him poking me with his pointy elbows. He does this by carefully surveying the arrangement of my body on the couch, and placing his body in the nooks, usually behind my slightly bent knees stacked together to the right side of my body on the couch. He awkwardly circles around a few times before he settles down, lying on my leg in such a way that I can feel every little thump of his heartbeat on my skin. Then, I make the final adjustments in my limbs as necessary in order to provide the most comfortable experience for both of us, feeling the warmth on my legs where his body meets mine, as well as in my heart. The fact that we each put thought and care into being in comfortable proximity means something to me, and it evidently means enough for him to continue cultivating this habit day after day.

He also started following me around the flat and eyeing my every move instead of staying comfortably on the couch like he used to. Even in the middle of his nap, if he notices a slight movement, usually by sound, his eyes open to locate me. When I go to the bedroom to hang up the laundry to dry, I hear the ‘pap, pap, pap’ against the wooden floor coming closer towards me until I see him settle down on the sheepskin rug by the bed to watch me do my chores. He always finds himself where he can keep his eyes on me, and this new habit on his part has been invaluable in my dealing with the loneliness that I feel in my bones. With him, I am even learning to enjoy peaceful moments of solitude with just the two of us in the rhythm of banality, despite all the distressing pandemic-related feelings I have been trying so hard to manage.
These emergent practices we have come to develop through bodily techniques thus have unmistakeable affective consequences. The steps that we share next to each other on our walks while physically isolated from everybody else; the leash that connects my body to his, its tautness directly correlated to the levels of Frank’s excitement and energy; the wet nose that investigates my right hand once a while to check if there are any treats; the feeling of this majestic beast’s pulsing heart – they all bring us bodily and affectively closer together in a time characterised by isolation. These practices, I argue in the next section, are a form of multispecies responsibilities, or response-abilities, the ‘praxis of care and response’ (Haraway, 2012: 302) that engenders and sustains our more-than-human kinship.

Multispecies response-abilities against proximal loneliness

These virus-induced emergent practices that Frank and I developed and the techniques that constitute them allow us to be and become responsible/response-able to and with each other in the viral world that disallowed so many other bodily techniques. That is, these emergent practices matter because they produce, maintain and strengthen a circuit of care and response between us, where care can be aptly defined as ‘everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair “our world” … which we seek to interweave in a complex, life sustaining web’ (Tronto, 1993: 103).

Understanding care in this way – not just the ‘nice’ things we do, but also the practices that are vital to the relationships that make up the very fibres of our lives – is an exercise in situating what it means to care in a pandemic. Here, vital doesn’t just mean necessary, but also vibrant and thriving. And therefore, ‘[s]tanding by the vital necessity of care means standing for sustainable and flourishing relations, not merely survivalist or instrumental ones’ (Weiss, 1973: 70); it means, as Donna Haraway (2015) urged, making kin, not (necessarily) babies – kinship that might be made out of a feminist ethics of care and responsibility in the face of proximal loneliness, one that is concerned with thriving mutuality.

Together, Frank and I have learned to attune our human and canine bodies towards the mutual goal of care in our kinship. A historically situated primate and a domesticated canine whose paths have happened to cross in a specific time and space in the universe, our very bodies have become ‘yoked together’ more closely than ever in lockdown. So, we become-with one another as we maintain our vitally caring more-than-human kinship (Haraway, 2012: 307). It is special that our multispecies care and response almost always happen within two metres when human physical engagements are extremely limited. And as we continue caring and responding to one another in such proximity, one of the affective consequences of our kinship – comprised of continuous maintenance and repair work to hold us response-able to one another – is the alleviation of proximal loneliness.

Frank’s caring role in the management of proximal loneliness in my lockdown doesn’t always involve overt affection. Though he has learned to cuddle, I would not describe him as a cuddly dog on the whole. But his presence is often enough: leaning on Frank while burying my nose into the plume of his soft white fur, I take a deep inhale. I catch a faint note of lilac, which is in bloom everywhere in our neighbourhood every
spring and summer, in the midst of his regular dog stink that I have come to normalise and love as the smell of home – something that unfailingly transports me back to halmoni’s dogs in her blossoming garden. Our bodily closeness and our shared sensory experiences remind me that we are proximal, our somatic consciousness habituating the same ‘field of material-semiotic meaning making’ (Haraway, 2012: 307), even if we had to make a little more room for the virus.

Earlier, I explained that ‘proximal’ refers to the nearness to a specific something or someone, a specific reference point. For me, the reference – the ‘point of attachment’, the ‘speaker’ – that stays close by, participating in mutual care practices with me in these lonely times, is Frank. A dog, warm and soft and fleshy, breathing the same air as me in the same space. A kind of stinky, very hairy and moderately barky boy who makes his presence known and felt on his own accord. Always excited for a walk or a treat, he has feelings and thoughts that he expresses through his own choices of bodily expressions such as tilting his head in confusion, perking up his ears in curiosity, growling in annoyance and jumping in excitement. For Frank, the reference is me. A human, warm and soft and fleshy, breathing the same air as him in the same space. A kind of stinky (but not as stinky as a dog), not very hairy and moderately talkative human who makes her presence known and felt on her own accord. Always happy to oblige my canine companion, I have feelings and thoughts that I express through my choices of bodily expressions such as chuckling at Frank’s innocent confusion, looking for what sparked his curiosity, scratching his ears to ease his growling and scrambling to get him to sit when his jumping becomes too much.

As such proximally connected entities, a human and a dog as kin, Frank and I are constantly ‘caught in a nonverbal conversation’ (Abram, 1996: 21), made up of ordinary, habituated, yet recognisable bodily techniques as our shared language. With the body as our vehicle of communication that is constantly influenced by other bodies, biotic or abiotic, around us, we are engaged in ‘a rapport with the multiple nonhuman sensibilities’ (Abram, 1996: 9). Every second I spend with him conversing in our bodily ways reminds me that Frank indeed is my ‘family, the beings with whom we are engaged, with whom we struggle and suffer and celebrate’ (Abram, 1996: ix). We are an entangled knot in the fabric of our multispecies ‘quaranteam’ that holds the entire tapestry together even as some threads fray and pull away as connections are weakened or lost in the pandemic through proximal loneliness. In this way, our emergent practices work to strengthen our entanglement even in the pandemic era during which I am disentangled from other (human) worlds.

In any entanglements within an assemblage, there are multiple melodies going on at once or at different times, turning into polyphonic music (see: Tsing, 2015). These melodies often intertwine, take turns being the dominant melody in our playful and mutual collaboration, connecting and propelling different notes, rhythms and tunes. Frank and I, two knotted reference points in our proximal togetherness, each create our melodies in our circuit of response-abilities that echo in one another.

How we care for and respond to one another has undoubtedly changed in the pandemic, and it will likely continue to change as the situation unfolds further. As well, how we look back on the loneliness that we faced before the pandemic, now that proximal
loneliness has become so ubiquitous, will affect our understanding of loneliness even beyond the pandemic. As we adopt new techniques of the body and habits, the bodily arrangements involved in our care and response will also change in turn. But keeping up with these uncomfortable new changes is a necessary and important part of our kinship across the species boundary. In these uncertain, lonely and daunting times, perhaps all we can do is to keep finding emergent practices that hold us response-able in the eyes of one another, turning them into collaborative notes in our mostly symphonic, but sometimes cacophonous, pandemic concerto.

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**Notes**

1. Racialisation and racism play a role here, too: as Sara Ahmed argued, racialised migrants are compelled to ‘learn to be affected in the right way by the right things’ (2010: 129; emphasis mine) in order to pursue a colonial vision of happiness – that is, whiteness – thrust upon them.
2. All names, human and canine (except Frank’s), that appear in this article have been changed in order to ensure anonymity.
3. This neat portmanteau that I am personally a very big fan of combines ‘quarantine’ and ‘team’, reminding us of the teamwork – mutual care and response – involved in kinship.

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