Sensing scalarity: Towards a humanistic approach to scale

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Abstract
This article develops the notion of “sense of scale” to theorize the emotional, tactile, and affective (re)production of scalarity during the coronavirus pandemic. The pandemic’s geographic upheavals — from personal proxemics to international travel bans — call for a return to scale that attends to its experiential qualities. Scale is continually conjured, apprehended, and (re)configured through proximal feelings and sensory encounters. After charting some conceptual foundations, subsequent sections discuss the relational transformation of the domestic, global, and urban scales under COVID-19. “Sense of scale” enables (post)humanistic theorizations of scale to take shape and also highlights the importance of scale for understanding everyday life.

Keywords
COVID-19, domestic, emotional geography, humanistic geography, scale, sense

I Introduction
Even as parts of the world begin the tentative thaw from long, uneven bouts of social distancing and isolation under COVID-19, the virus’ epidemiological, political, cultural, and spatial consequences — and the historical durability of those consequences — remain uncertain. The editors of Progress recently called for articles that engage with COVID-19 as a means of interrogating how such an event might transform the world, its spatialities, and the discipline of geography: “As part of this, are there older approaches, ideas or methods that might usefully be revisited? Conversely, what might we need to invent in order to address absences in our cognitive and normative toolbox?” (Castree et al., 2020: 412). This article heeds the call by revisiting scale and conceptualizing how the COVID-19 crisis helps accrue a “sensing” to a notoriously slippery and contested concept, rendering it more pliant, and also revealing its emotional dimensions.

Specifically, the pandemic dramatically altered everyday experiences of scale, and such rescaling thereby realigned lived relations to the world. The domestic scale especially was revalorized and reasserted, imbued with new significations and associations. At the same time, the experience of other scales imagined to be “higher” or “larger” (e.g. the urban and the

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global) made them feel more distant, unreachable, and abstract. If scale is relational (Brenner, 2001; Howitt, 1998), scalar interrelations were in a moment of radical flux during COVID-19. Such flux is, of course, a matter of politics and discourse, but those dimensions alone fail to capture the experiential qualities through which scale gets concretely conjured, apprehended, and (re)configured. Building on recent literatures on emotion, affect, and touch, this article proposes the concept of *sense of scale* to grasp the experiential and sensorial dimensions to scalability. This more humanistic *sense of scale* moves beyond previous debates to highlight how scale is co-constitutively linked with diverse subjects’ lifeworlds and the quotidian experiences that construct them.

The pandemic’s indeterminate period of arrested mobilities, fortified borders, and ennui-filled stay-at-home orders calls for a return to scale in this experiential sense. In some contexts, increased surveillance, restricted mobility, and enforced separation raised concerns of overexerted – even authoritarian – state power. In other contexts, the lack of concerted government response, reflecting a neoliberal logic of personal responsibility, effectively amounted to inaction and yielded disastrous health outcomes. From the first reported cases in China in December 2019, the virus’ spread and effects were largely an implicit story about scale. When, on January 13, 2020, officials confirmed a case in Thailand, followed by a cascade in other countries, the contagion went from an urban to an international event. On March 11, the WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic, a characterization defined precisely by its “worldwide spread”¹ as opposed to the localized or regional extent of an epidemic. Along the way, state officials imposed diverse, and diversely scaled, measures to curb the disease. Spatiality was dramatically recoded and reconfigured to map the emergent geographies of place, scale, and (im)mobility that structured the new normal of day-to-day existence. A variety of emotions and affects (e.g. dread, anxiety, nostalgia, and hope) emerged in relation to this rescaled reality. In other words, scale proved an especially salient – if silent – category in the pandemic’s unfolding, in ways not reducible to place or territory.

While subsequent sections discuss sensory engagements with the domestic, global, and urban scales, such analyses are predicated on the body as a prime locus of sensation. A sensorial approach to scale reasonably begins with “the shape, depth, biology, insides, outsides and boundaries of bodies placed in particular temporal and spatial contexts” (Longhurst, 2001: 2; Longhurst, 1997). Fundamentally, it was viral effects on physical bodies (or the threat thereof) that drove the scalar transformations described in subsequent sections. Pandemics reveal the embeddedness of human bodies in “the myriad topologies of other organisms, objects and technologies, each of which has its own particular shape and velocity in relation to others” (Dixon and Jones, 2015: 224). During the COVID-19 era, the “haptic geographies” (Paterson, 2009) of everyday life shifted.² Certain mundane touch points gained prominence. Hands encountered the oily smoothness of sanitizers and soaps, leaving reminders in the form of dry, cracked knuckles. The (relative) normalization of mask-wearing yielded new phenomenologies of touch, from restricted breathing to sore ears. COVID-19 also disrupted previous proprioception. Personal proxemics expanded through directives encouraging/enforcing a six-foot radius. Initially strange, this distance between bodies became almost reflexive within months. Perhaps most salient was the attempted constraint of tactile contact: the wariness and dread with which skin encountered public surfaces, other people, common objects, and even one’s own face.

Bodies are always constructed, dispersed, and incoherent assemblages. They are “‘stretched’ across space and time as they incorporate and shed biological material and as they are affected
in diverse ways by the environments they inhabit” (Dixon and Jones, 2015: 224). They are also imbricated in their psychosocial and cultural milieu. The social is always embodied, and bodies generate all sorts of contingent affects and emotions (Davidson and Milligan, 2004; Straughan, 2012). It is worth analytically distinguishing between at least two connotations of the word “sense” in this article – namely, the literal one of physical senses and the more metaphorical one of subjective feelings. While both meanings are deliberately evoked, they are not entirely collapseable, particularly vis-à-vis experiences of scale. Subsequent sections consider this slippage in more detail, but these two connotations are also related. The subjective, psycho-emotional dimensions of the pandemic had a great deal to do with physical threats and corporeality. Conversely, the haptic, tactile geographies of the pandemic likewise depended on certain gnostic, cultural forms of knowledge.

To conceptualize the contested rescaling of social life under COVID-19, the notion of sense of scale advances an embodied, emotional approach to scale. (Re)scaling is defined here as the discursive, material, and sensory process of dividing space into commensurable units (scales) of experience, regulation, and practice. This division is arbitrary in the sense that there is no necessary or ontological link between materiality and scale, and so any gestalt of scale might always be otherwise. At the same time, scalar arrangements – the division of space into scales – do not transform at random. They always respond to political-economic circumstance and new cultural dynamics, whether driven by ongoing capitalist restructuring or a viral pandemic. Seen thusly, scale is not only a material or discursive structure but also an experiential category conjured and articulated through registers of feeling.

Lockdowns, stay-at-home orders, and social distancing are not solely matters of political economy or discourse, nor only matters of abstract cartographic redrawing. They are also emotional, sensorial matters. They are apprehended, experienced, and (re)produced affectively and bodily. Sense of scale parallels the classic, albeit crude, distinction between space and place, wherein the latter emphasizes the meaningful, phenomenological, and experiential dimensions of spatiality (Cresswell, 2001). Sense of scale connotes a more humanistic – which is not to say less political – approach to scalarity. The COVID-19 pandemic illuminates the ways in which embodied (dis)connections to spatiality (re)produce and transform scale.

The rest of the article proceeds as follows. The second section reviews literatures of scale in geography to highlight previous conceptual priorities and (under)emphases. The third section generates an alternative approach to scale by engaging with recent literatures on affect, touch, emotional geographies, and nonrepresentational theory. Specifically, it calls for a more humanistic orientation that attends to scale through its experiential dimensions. The remaining sections then operationalize this approach to consider the rescaling of social life under COVID-19, using evidence drawn from journalism, urban photography, podcasts, and personal essays. Such sources offer multiple glimpses into pandemic life in various locations. However, it should also be noted that the geography of media hubs during an era of constrained movements – particularly in the early months of the pandemic, when these sources were gathered – yielded coverage disproportionately focused on urban centers. The fourth, fifth, and sixth sections examine the domestic, global, and urban scales, respectively. By way of conclusion, the seventh section indicates the utility of such an approach and gestures toward future research possibilities.

II Human Geography With Scale

The scalar turn in human geography emerged alongside debates over globalization and neoliberal restructuring across the social sciences.
As the nation-state appeared threatened by increasingly footloose capital (Harvey, 1989; 2005), the rise of global cities (Sassen, 2001), and the apparently widening gulf between nation and state (Appadurai, 1996a, 1996b), critical considerations of scale became prominent. This occurred alongside broader (re)orientations in social theory towards materiality and away from grand narratives. Before long, theorists generally converged on the realization that scale could not be considered fixed, stable, or pre-given. Broad consensus emerged that scale ought not to be deployed as a taken-for-granted explanation but that scale itself needed to be explained. Critical attention was consequently diverted from the effects of scale to the causes of scale. As Swyngedouw (2004: 132) put it, “Scalar configurations[ . . . ] are always already a result, an outcome of the perpetual movement of the flux of sociospatial and environmental dynamics.” To area and level, the two dominant modes of thinking scale, a crucial third dimension was added: scale as relation (Howitt, 1998; 2003). The scales commonly discussed – urban, regional, national, supranational, and global – do not preexist social relations nor emerge in isolation but rather transform in a co-constitutive relation, such that a change of the national necessarily implies a change of other scales as well (Brenner, 2001). Furthermore, scale is not only constitutively related to other scales but also to other geographical concepts that comprise all polymorphic spatialities (Jessep et al., 2008).

Scale, then, was conceptualized as a contested process – one that had material effects, to be sure, but one whose sociopolitical construction required at least as much interrogation. In other words, “the tendency to partition the social world into hierarchically ordered spatial ‘containers’ is what we want to explain – not explain things with” (Moore, 2008: 212). MacKinnon (2010) and others have identified two dominant strands that emerged during this overhaul to scalar thinking: an approach tied to Marxist political economy and an approach tied to post-structuralism.

Marxian theorists approach scale through the lens of capital accumulation, state power, and resistance. The world-systems work of Taylor (1982) builds a foundation for analyzing how scalar hierarchies organize and disperse varied political-economic processes. For Taylor, the local, national, and global correspond to the scales of experience, ideology, and capital accumulation, respectively. Smith (1982; 2008) redeploy this tripartite conception of scale, though in a way that attends more to the production of scale via capital’s contradictory tendencies toward equalization and differentiation (see also Jones et al., 2017). Others frame rescaling and scalar structuration within the related imperatives to de/reterritorialize political and economic power (Brenner, 1999; Swyngedouw, 1996, 2000). In such treatments, scale is the outcome of (or ad hoc palliative to) tensions arising from the contradictions of capital and economic restructuring. Even if such theorists do not assert the ontological and a priori existence of scale, they tend to portray scale as a relatively durable entity defined in terms of its systemic and structural qualities.

The post-structuralist approach, meanwhile, critiques the supposed reification of scale and theorizes scale as a constructed effect. The focus here is on the epistemologies of scalar categories – how they come into being through narrative, practice, and performance. Scale becomes “a way of framing conceptions of reality” (Delaney and Leitner, 1997: 94–95) rather than a reality per se. The challenge, therefore, is to explore “how people experience and employ scalar categories in order to make sense of their world” (Giesbrecht et al., 2010: 464). Work in this vein explores the rescaling of cities as local, regional, national, international, or global, depending on embedded historical and spatial relationships. González (2006) describes “scalar narratives” in the reconstruction of Bilbao, Spain. Kaiser and Nikiforova (2008) develop the
“performativity of scale” to capture similar processes in post-Soviet Narva, Estonia. Fraser (2010) draws attention to “scalecraft” to highlight the “skills, aptitudes, and experiences involved in producing, working with, or exploiting geographic scale” (334). Scale becomes a constructed effect, always open to reconfiguration and contestation.

This is not to say that bodies, experience, and feeling were absent from earlier work on scale. Some of Neil Smith’s (1992) early treatments are centrally concerned with the movement of certain kinds of bodies in certain kinds of ways. Marston’s (2000; 2004) work evinces a deep concern for gendered bodies harnessing scale. Even the most deconstructionist approaches to scale move beyond “discourse” to employ topology, Actor-Network Theory (ANT), and assemblage thinking (e.g. Jones et al., 2007), all of which bear affinities (and common lineage) with literatures on affect and sensuous experience. If affect, sensation, and feeling have been present – if often implicit – in scalar thinking, then a question arises: Why have these strands not been drawn out in subsequent debates within human geography? Part of the problem is that scale, in whatever framing, seems to resist phenomenological exploration. It is either too large or too abstract, bearing some hallmarks of a “hyperobject” (Morton, 2013). Nevertheless, scale does manifest with affective, emotional, and sensory effects. Attending to everyday encounters with scale enables not only a richer engagement but also a more accurate account of its constitution, transformation, and consequences. Scale is always experienced locally and incompletely, and this is precisely what enables theorizing it from a phenomenological and (post)humanist perspective. Even if scale per se might not present itself nonrepresentationally to phenomenological experience, its local fragments do. As discussed in the fifth and sixth sections, these local manifestations, through a metonymic relation, are where scale becomes tangible, practicable, and legible.

The “surfeit of meanings and uses” (Sayre, 2009: 96) around scale not only makes it exceedingly difficult to theorize productively but to even converge on a conceptual–terminological terrain upon which such critical conversations might happen. In light of the many problems and conflations of scalar thinking, Marston et al. (2005) provocatively call to abandon scale as an explanatory concept, to “expurgate scale from the geographic vocabulary” (Marston et al., 2005: 422). This, perhaps, was the apotheosis of the post-structuralist critique. Arguing that scale’s (mis)uses had tainted the concept such that it now obfuscates more than it reveals, they call for a flat or site-based ontology in its stead (Jones et al., 2007). Their critiques of the concept are compelling, particularly the tendency toward conflating particular scales with forms of social power, such that “global” corresponds to structure, space, flows, and mobility while “local” corresponds to agency, place, fixity, and rootedness. Nevertheless, as subsequent scholars have argued, there is still a pressing need to examine scale because it is experientially meaningful as an instrument of power (e.g. Jonas, 2006; Leitner and Miller, 2007). Scale may well falter as a category of analysis, but it retains salience as a category of practice (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000; Moore, 2008). Scale is, to lift a phrase that James Clifford (1988) applied to culture, a deeply compromised idea that we cannot yet do without.

III Towards a Sense of Scalarity

The political-economy and post-structuralist approaches highlight a key tension in the scale debates – namely, the real-but-imagined quality of scale, often framed in binary terms of materiality/discursivity, ontology/epistemology, and analysis/practice. In whatever guise, these framings tend to render scale abstractly. When scale is presented as an effect of political economy or discourse, the experiential, embodied
dimensions to scale shift out of view. Such sensorial dimensions, however, are precisely how scale is concretely conjured, apprehended, and refashioned. This is why a humanistic “sense of scale” matters theoretically. Scalar arrangements gain traction— or perhaps fail to gain traction— through embodied engagements with/in an ever-shifting world. It is through these sensory encounters that scale obtains and becomes a concrete entity and lived reality.

This section thus sketches the foundations for a new agenda examining sense of scale. “Sense” is meant to gather and congeal an array of related literatures, especially recent treatments of emotional geographies, affect, and touch. This deliberately plays upon the multiple connotations of the terms “sense” and “feel.” Of course, emotion, affect, and touch are not collapsible analytically. Different registers of sense (e.g. haptic, pathic, tactile, and emotional) are not isomorphic, even as words like “feel” get indiscriminately applied to all of these. To see mediated images of abandoned urban streets is not the same as the kinesthesia experienced while walking those streets. And yet, while useful distinctions maintain, the different resonances of “sense” are also not wholly separable. Dixon and Straughan (2010) explicitly link haptics with pathic knowledges. Even distal, mediated forms of knowledge generate embodied, affective responses. Similarly, emotional and affective feelings create (dis)inclinations and inhibitions towards certain forms of tactile touch. This was especially apparent during COVID-19. Using “sense” to theorize scale does not abandon distinctions but rather opens multiple pathways into a more proximate, situated conceptualization of scale.

The COVID-19 era, with so many people ambivalently confined to the home, presents a stark opportunity to broaden the conceptual horizons of scale, to include its experiential qualities. Sense of scale attempts to capture this humanistic dimension. If space becomes place as it gets imbedded with meaning in the context of power (Cresswell, 2004) and movement becomes mobility the same way (Cresswell, 2006), scale becomes sense of scale when it acquires similar cultural, subjective, and emotional resonances. This is distinct from place. It is not, for example, how one experiences a particular home (as place) but how one experiences a general, commensurable domestic (as scale)—a collapsed emotional realm, a safe fortification, a prison cell, a remote workplace or a schoolhouse. At the same time, “sense” also gestures towards an embodied, touchy-feely (Crang, 2003; Paterson, 2009) apprehension of scale, the ways in which emotion, affect, and haptics enable people to sense and make sense of scale, to render it meaningful.

Some previous work examines scale vis-à-vis identity and this provides a useful starting point. Vainikka’s (2016) research in England and Finland highlights the emotional connections to spatial features to demonstrate the scalarity of identity:

Individuals form scalar identities by relating their localized knowledge to various socially constructed, nested imaginaries of geographical entities or through emotional engagements of being part of differently scaled, performable cultural practices. In short, emotions that help people to realize their identification to different spatial scales have various stimuli. (Vainikka, 2016: 9)

Other studies similarly suggest the importance of scale for self-perception and identity construction, from the shifting “local” as a mediated category of national belonging (Appleton, 2002) to the “global” or “urban” affiliations professed by cosmopolitans (Müller, 2011; Szerszynsky and Urry, 2002). Yoking one’s identity to scale—not just place—is a common practice, and it can also be used to forge new solidarities and affiliations. There is a horizontal dimension to scale, through which spaces of the same (vertical) “level” are imagined as commensurable in ways not reducible to area. To be a national is not the same thing as
being Kenyan (re: as opposed to Tanzanian) and to be an urbanite is not the same thing as being a New Yorker (re: as opposed to a Parisian). Much like with place, expressing scalar affiliations communicates and reveals something about one’s identity.

While parallel to theories of place, the feelings attached to scale are distinct and distinguishable. The horizontal commensurability of scale – in addition to its vertical layering – yields a category that is irreducible to area, place, or territory (cf. Brenner, 2001). Geographical experience and imagination ceases to be about place when sites are imagined as commensurable – which is to say, when a defining characteristic is precisely the categorical commonality rather than unique particularity. To speak of “home” during the pandemic sometimes referred to one’s particular dwelling, and this was, indeed, a matter of place. However, the invocation of home often connoted the general scalar category, such that the domestic scale (rather than the home place) was evidently most relevant for wrestling meaning from spatiality (Linder, 2020).

The critiques of traditional humanistic geography – its emphasis on individual experience, its lack of attention to power, and its rosy view of place – have been well made many times over. Following Bondi (2005), I do not seek a return to that paradigm but rather use it as a springboard into more recent interventions in the discipline. For both affect theory and non-representational theory, one crucial challenge is to find ways of interrogating processes that are often pre/unreflexive and extradiscursive (Anderson and Harrison, 2010; Figlerowicz, 2012; Gregg and Seigworth, 2010; Lorimer, 2005, 2008; Thrift, 2004). This frequently yields a focus on the ordinary and the everyday, the facets of life so commonplace and unexpressed as to find scant inclusion at the table of high theory. The challenge is to engage more directly with sense and sensation, the body and embodiment, and habits and dispositions, as a means of overcoming the historical emphasis on cognition, will power, and individual agency.

Recent work on geographies of touch and emotion has operationalized and advanced this project. While some theorists (e.g. Massumi, 2002) pose a hard distinction between affect and emotion, or between embodied feeling and representations thereof, others challenge or dissolve this distinction (Ahmed, 2004; Bondi, 2005). Emotions, moreover, are interrelated to history, objects, and culture, unyoking them from the personal interiority of a transcendent individual subject. This renders emotions legible to research (Bennett, 2004; 2009). Emotions and affects are not produced by hermetically individuated subjects nor by agentic objects, but rather in the relational encounter between the two. Emotions, therefore, index wider fields of action, up to and including the diplomatic and geopolitical (Jones and Clark, 2019). Objects and subjects themselves, meanwhile, are both already constituted through their own multiple relations to other objects and subjects. Feeling is not an individual matter but a contingent and productive outcome of encounter. Emotions are mobilized through the entanglements of bodies and environments (Straughan, 2012).

In a related turn, theorists have increasingly turned to touch, emphasizing that “bodily sensations are a vital part of how social formations evolve” (Bissell et al., 2020: 1893). Touch offers a means of accessing the ongoing (re)constitution of selves, objects, and environments through their interfacing (Dixon and Straughan, 2010). Touch can forge connections but also “losing touch” can forge disconnection (Bissell et al., 2020). As with affect and nonrepresentational theory, a major concern is with countering the presumption that “experience is manifest primarily through the symbolic realm, and in particular through representational forms such as language that become associated with idealistic goals of accuracy and precision” (Dixon and Straughan, 2010: 450). Such work also decenters the human by highlighting the
productive mingling and interpenetration of humans with other forms of life and matter (Hawkins and Straughan, 2014; Straughan, 2015). The “humanistic” sense of scale discussed here is always already a post-humanistic sense of scale – one that emerges out of and acknowledges the shifting entanglements of different forms of matter and life, from pathogen droplets to public buses, human nostrils to touchscreens, latex gloves to plexiglass dividers.

The subsequent analysis follows Bondi’s (2005) psychotherapeutic approach that draws together these ideas with the term sense:

This ‘sense’ is simultaneously felt and thought, embodied and abstract, affective and emotional, performative and representational, personally experienced and relational. In this way, psychotherapy offers a framing that traverses distinctions between representations of emotion and the emotions themselves, and between emotion and affect. (Bondi, 2005: 444)

If touch arouses an “infinity of others – other beings, other spaces, other times” (Barad, 2012: 206), scale is one such “other” aroused by particular emotions and by particular (dis)connections rendered through touch and affect. At the same time, scale is not only produced in this bodily, sensory interfacing with the environment but also apprehended and mobilized through it. Via touch, scale becomes palpable. Via emotion, scale affords a sensibility of one’s situatedness in the world and one’s relationship to the world. Through affects of connection and disconnection, love and animosity, and topophilia and topophobia, scale becomes a concrete index of sociospatial life. All of this falls within my use of the term sense. To sense scale is to make sense of the world. A sense of scale stems not from an essential individual subjectivity but from an ongoing reiterative engagement with relational emotions and contingent touches (or lacks thereof). Scale, then, is also fundamentally malleable – as the contingent touches, emotions, and their sociospatial relations transform, so too will scalarity.

Touch and sensation evoke a proximal rather than distal form of knowledge, a knowledge that is immediate and pathic rather than gnostic and abstract (Dixon and Straughan, 2010; Hetherington, 2003). In the conclusion to their formative article on the topic, Dixon and Straughan (2010) suggestively raise the issue of scale:

Implicit here, we want to suggest, is the notion that touch already operates from a scale-less position and that the gaze can and should be rewrought accordingly. And yet, as Marston et al. (2005) go on to argue, while scale has been rendered suspect as an analytic category that we bring to an analysis we should not abandon it as a highly contested, socially constructed object of inquiry; hence, there is much to do in regard to analysing how touch and feelings of being in/out of/losing touch, become integral to all manner of ‘scaled’ relations, from the concerted effort to organise work, for example, at the global, national, regional and local scales, to the apprehension of the body as that scale which is closest in. (Dixon and Straughan, 2010: 456)

This article extends this line of inquiry by laying an intellectual foundation for a “sense of scale” apprehended and constituted not only discursively but sensorially – that is, through emotion, affect, and haptics. This includes the emotional consumption of media images as well as the new surfaces encountered through cutaneous touch, the diminishment of routine touch points and the affects that result. These are all interrelated. Sense is a means of capturing this constellation of feelings that attach not only to place but to scale as well. COVID-19 and its consequent “stay at home” imperatives call out for just this sort of analytical approach. The following sections curate a series of public sources to construct a narrative that highlights the centrality of sensation for the reconstitution and reconfiguration of scalarity during the pandemic moment.
IV Sensing the Domestic Scale

Scale literatures frequently underemphasize the domestic scale (Marston, 2000; 2004), but the household became especially salient during COVID-19. For those privileged enough to stay at home during the pandemic (which of course excludes many), the domestic scale absorbed practices and processes previously associated with other sites and scales. The locations comprising life’s everyday circuits – workplaces, schools, restaurants, stores, salons, museums, parks, plazas, airports, etc. – were no longer tenable or practicable under pandemic conditions. At least temporarily, many worked, taught, learned, shopped, and socialized from home. The domestic scale became the prime arena of social life.

This was, of course, a matter of place as one came into new relationships with a particular dwelling. But it was also a matter of scale as one sensed this transformed social spatiality in ways recognized as commensurable. To watch late-night comedy shows shift to “at home” editions without an audience, to feel the uncomfortable implosion of public/private arenas, to dress professionally in one’s kitchen for a Zoom meeting (with others dressed similarly in their own kitchens) – all of this contributed to the felt sense of the domestic not as a particular place but as a commensurable scale, one that indexed a more generalized social situation. It was not about my home or your home, but the home.

Diseases create landscapes of fear (Tuan, 1979), and the home is often framed as a secure bastion against perceived external threats (Davidson, 2003a, 2003b). From the beginning of the COVID-19 lockdowns and stay-at-home orders, a menagerie of negative, apocalyptic feelings attached itself to the domestic scale. In her introductory remarks on National Public Radio’s Fresh Air (April 22, 2020), Terri Gross said, “The coronavirus isn’t the end of the world, but your anxiety may make you feel like it is, and your home may be feeling like a bunker.” As Kelsey Piper (2020) wrote for Vox: “It’s weird how much being locked down feels different from staying home voluntarily. We’d decided weeks ago we should avoid others, do our part in preventing this pandemic from overrunning hospitals. But now that it’s required, it’s stressful.”

The sense of the domestic scale as confining, stifling, and claustrophobic was especially pronounced in cities like New York:

NYC apartments[…], with their combined living and dining rooms (sometimes kitchens too) feel more cramped now than ever. These days you spend so much time in your place you look at it differently. Those built-ins and shelves that reach the ceiling (so great for storage!) now feel oppressive. You realize every square inch of your space is being used. There’s nowhere to rest your eyes. You’re sick of looking at your own stuff and the clutter makes you feel like you are drowning. Why didn’t you notice you lived like this before? (Karp, 2020)

As Straughan (2012) demonstrates, the haptic encounter between sensing bodies and their environments produces emotional effects. In New York City apartments, the interface between haptics and cramped living spaces yielded claustrophobic proprioception, a sudden feeling of extreme enclosure in space. Senses of scale are not one-dimensional. They emerge from the conjunctural relations between space, temporality, bodies, and (inter)subjectivity. Different spatialities of the home, therefore, produce different senses of the domestic scale. Such senses entail unique emotions, affects, and tactilities, and these dimensions are necessarily interrelated. The spatial economy of New York results in tinier living spaces. As many darkly joked during the pandemic, these smaller apartments are accepted on the assumption that one’s backyard and daily stomping grounds will be the city itself. In lockdown conditions, that covenant was broken: “the trade-off between what you give up and what you get for living
here has evaporated. It’s not clear when or if the balance will return” (Karp, 2020).

With such pacts broken, many experienced a sort of scalar stress. Circuits of daily life were radically constrained, making the world beyond feel distanced and estranged. The global, national, and urban existed “outside” direct experience as the (re)scaling of social life proceeded. At the same time, the exterior global, national, and urban increasingly imploded into the interior domestic scale, invading an arena supposedly defined by its intimate privacy. Lockdowns created a spatially constrained set of touched stimuli but a saturation of overabundant and spatially extensive mediated images. Light switches, kitchen tiles, and laptop keyboards gained relative prominence over sidewalks, steering wheels, and turnstiles. The haptic and mediated dimensions of experience got reshuffled. It was extreme physical enclosure coupled with (over)exposure to news, a sense of being simultaneously in the world, cleft to an ever-present threat, and yet dramatically disconnected from that world at the same time.

This tension arising from the spatial reordering during COVID-19 constituted a deeply ambivalent domestic scale. It is notable how many writers framed their common experience of home directly in terms of sense and touch. On loneliness, Agnes Callard (2020) wrote, “When I look up from my work, what I see is no one: no one to reach out to, no one to dress up for, no one to shock, or surprise, or impress.” In an essay on dating during the pandemic, Lucy McKeon (2020) wrote,

These days, in the first apartment I’ve lived in alone, solitude, usually a pleasure to be protected, feels more like an interminable necessity. I find myself daydreaming: if quarantine becomes stricter, or I end my contract in favor of complete isolation, what would it be like not to touch another person for a few weeks, for a month—for two? (McKeon, 2020)

These negative emotions, apocalyptic feelings, and affects of isolation were not simply about place because they adhered within the generalizable scale of the domestic. As Adam Foulds (2020) put it, “I have briefly the abstract sensation that our lurid reality has been thickening and thickening and has now solidified into this one thing, this situation, general paralysis, everyone immobilized in their homes.” The experience transcends the particularity of place through its imagined commensurability (Linder, 2020). The rescaling of life highlighted the difficulty of taking many social processes suited—or long imagined to be suited—for “higher” scales and transferring them “down” to the domestic.

Rescaling, as a process of transformation and reconfiguration, is also about temporality, and time was a common theme in writings about the domestic scale during the pandemic: “It is this scrambling of temporal sequences, this loss of linear time—even as we are confined in space—that is most disorienting about this crisis” (Duesterberg, 2020). The virus disrupted normal rhythms of life and vanished the temporal markers through which people divide it:

During a shutdown, the things that mark our days—commuting to work, sending our kids to school, having a drink with friends—vanish and time takes on a flat, seamless quality. Without some self-imposed structure, it’s easy to feel a little untethered. A friend recently posted on Facebook: “For those who have lost track, today is Blursday the fortyteenth of Maprilay.” (Pitlor, 2020)

The imperative to confine one’s life to the domestic scale—again, for those fortunate enough to do so—induced its own loneliness, dislocation, and apocalyptic feelings. These were rendered all the more acute by the lack of clear timelines, which yielded a sense of indeterminacy and unknown duration.

Such is the disorientation that ensues when the “bodily relations that orient us become undone” (Bissell and Gorman-Murray, 2019: 708). During COVID-19, however, such
relational undoings emanated less from increased mobilities than from the constraining of mobilities (cf. Bissell and Gorman-Murray, 2019; Bissell et al., 2020). Generally, if unevenly, people were stuck. As Straughan et al. (2020) argue, experiences of “stuckness”—and the tactics employed to mitigate them—necessarily exist in relation to other mobilities. Stuckness is defined and exacerbated by its foil: the movement of partners and peers. During the pandemic, however, such alterity was found not so much in the mobilities of other people as in past selves, the mobilities and relations that used to structure experience, that formerly oriented lives.

And yet, the relations through which bodies and places orient us were not simply undone; they were reconfigured. The rescaling of social life, in part owing to scale’s imagined commensurability, also yielded a certain solidarity and positive affect for some: “At night, indoors, we gaze across at our neighbors from afar. Everyone is home, every window lit up, side by side, each of us emitting our worried beacon in solitude” (Greenberg, 2020). People took cold comfort in the commonality of their confinement in a rescaled life. Timothy Aubry (2020) noted that his apartment “hasn’t exactly become the prison I feared it would be.” For him, it expanded, took on new significance and uses. He was not unique in this regard. Many people used home technologies to communicate with family and friends more than ever. Remote book clubs, livestreamed musical performances, Zoom happy hours, virtual Passover Sédars and Easter egg hunts, digital worship services, online bachelorette parties, and more all emerged— not to maintain an illusion of normalcy but to recast the domestic as a viable scale of community and solidarity, at least temporarily.

As commonplace, sedimented spatialities get disrupted by events like COVID-19, the process of rescaling life to the domestic creates conceptual (and somatic) stress. During the pandemic, previous cultural maps no longer coincided with sociospatial reality. The disjunctures were experienced bodily and emotionally, in the daily movements throughout the home, the new domestic routines, and the onslaught of old tasks rescaled and respatialized.

V Uncanny Emptiness: Situating and Sensing the Global

It is straightforward enough to argue for a humanistic sense of scale in the more proximate spatiality of the home, but what of “higher” scales? How are geographers to operationalize a sensory approach to more abstract scales like the global? The answer is to embrace the constructedness and abstractness of scale in the first place. Subjects apprehend scale through scaling processes, such that Wall Street or Times Square is perceived as “more global” than, say, Kansas, despite covering a far smaller portion of the globe in terms of geographic area. Social actors “situate” space and place at different scales (Chuang and Trémont, 2013; Linder, 2019). Discussions of the narrative and performative contestations over scalability presume as much (González, 2006; Kaiser and Nikiforova, 2008). The metonymic construal of a site as “global” offers a means of applying sense of scale by attending to those very sites. It is through particular places/locations that subjects sense and touch abstract scales.

Recent work has drawn attention to the phenomenon of “losing touch” due to increased mobility (Bissell et al., 2020; Cohen and Gössling, 2015). As the pandemic made painfully clear, “losing touch” can also stem from relative immobility. The feeling of the “global” breaking down or dissolving under COVID-19 can be read precisely as a process of losing touch with the material sites through which people previously apprehended and sensed that “higher” scale. A relative lack of mobility inhibited the tactile, phenomenological, and emotional engagement with the very spaces through which
the constructed abstraction of scale gets conjured and experienced. In what follows, it is useful to once more note the different coordinates of both “sense” and “touch” (e.g. emotional, affective, and tactile). The tactile and kinesthetic sensations of walking in crowded transit hubs all but vanished during lockdown. Home offices and domestic surfaces displaced escalators and pressurized cabins. Even for those who did (or could) traverse an airport hub, such movements predominantly yielded new anxieties and dreads. Consequently, most were left with mediated images beamed into the domestic scale.

Such mediation – viewing signifiers of the global from home – inherently entails distance from the referent, underscoring the lack of physical encounter with such sites. At the same time, images have emotional and affective resonances in their own right, especially as they are informed by prior embodied experiences. Such resonances are transformed and exacerbated by distance. Geographical experiences are not wholly reducible to materiality and tactile encounter, though they are no less “sensed” for that. Place, locale, and mobility are always already bound up in cultural-discursive systems. The same is true for scale. Bodily sensations take on new pathic character as discourses and representations of invisible pathogens inflect them. Once a particular site has been discursively scaled, shifting encounters with that site transform experiences of the “larger” scale it indexes. The affects of COVID-19, then, require attention to each of these forms of “sense” precisely because they frequently feed back into one another.

A genre of photo essay and writing became widespread early in the pandemic, one that highlighted the uncanny emptiness of usually crowded sites. Airports garnered particular fascination in this sort of coverage. The format typically presented a series of photos – empty terminals, deserted baggage claims, and curbside pickup/drop-off areas devoid of their normal car traffic. These were accompanied by a whole lexicon of affective/emotional terms: “eerie,” “haunting,” and “surreal.” Death and haunting were recurring themes. A Forbes headline referred to “Europe’s Ghost City Airports” (Garcia, 2020). Business Insider reported, “Once vibrant, bustling centers for the facilitation of travel have been reduced to ghost towns operated by skeleton crews serving the few remaining flights that have yet to be cut by airlines” (Pallini, 2020).

There are also other sites, beyond airports, that are typically situated at the global scale. The uncanniness of their abandonment likewise received coverage. Foreign Policy reported,

The corridors of the United Nations headquarters took on a ghostly silence this week as some vulnerable diplomats began to pack their bags and flee New York City, while all but essential U.N. staff were ordered to stay away from Turtle Bay and told to manage the world’s problems from the safety of their computers at home. (Lynch, 2020)

An accompanying image to the story showed rings of empty chairs in the UN Security Council chamber. It did not much matter that the photo was taken well before the pandemic, prior to the start of a 2018 meeting. The effect is an affect – uncanny abandonment, of empty spaces that “ought” to be peopled to successfully signify the global. The uncanny connotes a quality of experience wherein the ordinary becomes frightfully strange; the familiar becomes unfamiliar (Freud, 1919; Straughan, 2014). From spatial distance to images of emptiness, from lack of embodied encounter to structured feelings of dissolution, the pandemic highlighted the new weirdness of “normal” landscapes. These combined to refashion geographic sites and to cast a shadowy sense of dread across known spaces and their signified scales.

There was certainly something surreal and uncanny about this sort of coverage, which partially stems from highlighting the disconnection and infrastructural disruption wrought by COVID-19. This was not only scalar, but scale
was an especially crucial component. When such sites index a broader scale, experiences of such sites (mediated or direct) cease to be merely a matter of place or location. Subjects encounter and apprehend the abstraction of scale sensorially, through emotion and affect and touch. Major airports, perhaps more than any other type of space, emblematically index the “global” scale through their promise of worldwide connectivity. Airport hubs and the United Nations are symbolic and material proxies for the abstract global. The apparent near-desertion of such spaces during the pandemic was “haunting” because it experientially registered as the (likely temporary) death of the “global.”

VI Losing Touch With the Urban

A similar effect was apparent in cities. The New York Times developed a photographic project, “The Great Empty,” specifically aimed at documenting the abandonment of public spaces around the world. Magazines and social media were awash with images of deserted streets and plazas, shuttered restaurants, and empty commercial shopping areas. Again, these were often narrated in terms of death and haunting:

Some of the strangest sights are Rome’s great Baroque squares: Piazza Navona and Piazza del Popolo are vast expanses of emptiness. Piazzas, after all, are the hub of Italian urban life—they serve as playgrounds for children and their outdoor cafés are social gathering points for cappuccino in the morning and aperitivo in the early evening. I heard Rome described this way: it’s as if a neutron bomb has exploded. There’s no life left, but all the buildings and monuments stand intact. Life in #coronavirusitalia is like being suspended between the Dark Ages and a globalized sci-fi future. (Poggioli, 2020)

Or consider the reflection of a food writer returning to Paris from the United States:

I arrived in a city much different from the one I left: Once characterized by community and spirited consumption, Paris had become throttled by a collective anxiety, only evidenced by absences: the stillness outdoors; the unnatural space people granted each other on sidewalks; the woven Gatti chairs neatly stacked and hidden inside dark brasseries; the invisible enemy that many of us only heard about on the news but could now feel everywhere. (Gunther, 2020)

There are two dimensions to such coverage. On the one hand, writers/photographers were expressing their own “direct” encounter with transformed urban landscapes. On the other hand, their portrayals got mobilized in the media, resulting in still more affective and bodily impacts on readers/viewers. These varied modes of encounter, therefore, were not discrete realms of experience. They were entangled with one another. “Sense” and “touch” here are both literal and metaphorical, implying spatial and corporeal processes as well as social and subjective ones. The sensory relationship between people and space through which urban life is maintained was largely suspended during COVID-19, leaving cities “empty, eerie, and listless” (Matthews, 2020).

In losing touch with the spatial sites that metonymically index the urban, many sensed a loss of the urban itself. An affect of nostalgia came to bear: mourning for the disappearance of urban identifications made recently untenable. Representations triggered nonrepresentational responses. They marked an absence (of former sociality) and also marked a presence (of an invisible pathogen). Even such reminders-at-a-distance manifested bodily, emotionally, and affectively. One column, structured as a letter to New York, captured this tangled sense of longing and nostalgia:

All is forgiven if you will only return: the subway soliloquies of the homeless, the trains that never come, the trains that stop in the middle of the tunnel, the traffic, the garbage trucks blocking...
cross streets, the jackhammering of construction, the hiss of smoke from a manhole cover, the idling stretch-limo S.U.V.s, the drone of a million air-conditioning units, the drivers leaning on horns, the city hum that never ceases, until it did. (Cohen, 2020)

The urban felt lost when its sensory effects – rattling trains and hissing manhole covers – were no longer present to experience. This loss was rendered all the more acute by media reminders. It was also through scale that people made sense of the pandemic moment. To witness the eerie abandonment of the urban was to make real and concrete an invisible virus that was perceptible only in its effects. Senses of scale articulated the fundamental precarity of sociospatial (and biological) lifeworlds and simultaneously oriented people in disorienting times.

For many, tenuous relations to former urban lives were reduced to rare moments of food/package delivery and nervous grocery runs, but not everyone had the “luxury” of losing touch with the urban through domestic confinement. There were, obviously, those delivering the packages. They remained very much “in touch” with the reconfigured urban. The “essential workers” of the pandemic – not just medical professionals, but delivery drivers, grocery clerks, custodial workers, etc. – perhaps had similar senses of scale, but they regularly traversed the landscapes of fear and abandonment rather than viewing them anxiously through windows and mediated images. The reality of working in public created new touch points and affects, as one restaurant worker in Los Angeles recounted:

I spray down the counters incessantly, and “sanitize” the pens (dunk them in bleach) after each use. I rush around matching boxes of food to their tickets while delivery drivers fill the restaurant. I shuffle between the three separate iPads we are now using for online delivery orders. Perspiration pools on my lip beneath my mask as I sweat through slammed shifts. (Selevitch, 2020)

Disconnecting from the urban yielded eeriness and isolation, but remaining connected yielded a different sort of anxiety, colored by bodily danger and stress. The woes of not encountering strangers and public spaces paled beside the woes of being forced to by financial and professional circumstance. One emergency medical technician (EMT) summed it up well:

The job I used to enjoy every second of now scares me tremendously. My excitement has been replaced by anxiety, and I am finding myself hesitant to work. I wonder how I am supposed to keep other people safe if I can’t even keep myself safe. (Butch, 2020)

Of course, there was an emergent affect of gratitude and admiration for these workers. There was also the acute recognition – because one could always be “out there” – of the unfairness and injustice of present class (and racial) divisions. Many other workers were laid off or furloughed. One essential worker’s essay captured the anxious, surreal quality of inhabiting the urban scale during the pandemic:

It remained nonetheless foreboding. All around me were shuttered businesses or bars open for carryout. And as with all the places I used to frequent, my first thought was what the employees were up to, and how unfair it felt that I was still getting to work while they didn’t. I wondered how they were making ends meet. I wondered if their jobs would still exist in a few weeks. And of course, I wondered if they were sick. (Rudoff, 2020)

The relation of many essential workers to space per se remained largely as it was, but the world had rescaled around them. They were forced to inhabit an urban scale that was utterly transformed, one that had abruptly dissolved into an eerie, apocalyptic landscape.

VII Conclusion

COVID-19 dramatically transformed social space in general but also senses of scale in
particular. It upended previous scalar arrangements in ways not wholly captured by earlier approaches. Among other effects, the pandemic ignited widespread scalar stress, whereby previous imaginaries of the domestic, the urban, and the global faltered and became less tenable. Such forced (and contested) reconfigurations of scalarity did not occur abstractly. They actualized in everyday, embodied experiences. The domestic absorbed new functions and feelings. Putative functions of the urban and global scales mutated and migrated. This was exacerbated and realized by distance and remoteness. New scalar formations were forged through new sensory encounters. To ignore these humanistic dimensions of scalarity is to foreclose richer engagements with scale and unnecessarily hobble geographical analyses more broadly.

Sense, then, is the dialogic process through which new scalar arrangements are simultaneously conjured, apprehended, constructed and consumed. A humanistic sense of scale enables the analysis of rescaling as a process not simply produced and experienced through the machinations of political economy and discourse but through affective, emotional, and tactile engagements with particular sites. As people lose touch with these sites, they sense the dissolution of particular scales as well as the reinvigoration and transformation of others. Taken together, sense effectively orders and fuses particular scalar arrangements for some duration. If scale is relational, sense does much of the work to refashion and congeal those constitutive relations – relations to other imaginaries/ experiences of scale, to other facets of spatiality, and to other temporal moments.

Much of this article concerned what COVID-19 offers to an analysis of scale. This analysis of scale, however, also enables new pandemic responses to take shape. Many of the disciplines at the forefront of pandemic response lack the nuanced approach to spatiality common among geographers. To think sensorially about scale compels recognition of the importance of scale in cultural life. It begs us to consider ways of mitigating the psychosocial damage wrought by stay-at-home orders and the sense of dissolution at “higher” scales. The fierce debate over sporting events during COVID-19 reflected this especially. The clamor to return to normalcy was a matter of entertainment, and it was also a matter of place as cities longed to cheer for their home teams. But, at another level, athletic competitions also offer a sense of scalar normalcy: the spectacle of commensurable cities squaring off effectively reassures audiences that the urban (comprising a multitude of sites) persists.

Any scalar arrangement is only a contingent semi-coherence, and transformations in any gestalt of scale appear sensorially. As such, a humanistic sense of scale offers a means of identifying incipient, emergent changes to scale and also of theorizing the contestations, frictions, and disjunctures to which such changes give rise. During the pandemic, the possibility of rescaling social and work life in a more sustainable, accessible, and equitable way was being discussed as never before. At the same time, the dimensions of “sense” discussed above – affect, emotion, and haptics – might themselves come into conflict with one another. While the foregoing analysis tended toward showing how these co-constituted and reinforced one another, geographers might well consider dissonant instances in which this is not the case.

This article, then, has sketched the conceptual foundations for rethinking scale from a more experiential perspective. Seeking to redress the under-emphases of previous approaches, sense of scale opens new avenues of analysis and critique. As the pandemic made clear, the issue of scale remains salient, yet the rescaling of contemporary life calls for new conceptual approaches. The reformulations of scale under COVID-19 were sensory matters through and through. By developing terminology and a framework for exploring this conceptual terrain, this article has
gestured towards an approach to scale that attends to its sensuous actualization. Such an approach helps grasp the unstable scalarity of the pandemic moment as well as whatever future reconfigurations may yet still come.

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