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Feeling in Suspension: Waiting in COVID-19 Shopping Queues

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The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent UK lockdown were a catalyst for mass waiting. This paper will focus on a phenomenon, a particular form of waiting observed in shopping queues during lock down in the North East of England. Waiting practices formed through the COVID-19 pandemic have opened new forms of *feeling*, requiring new forms of articulation. As such the paper experiments with language and form speculatively describing feelings and temporalities through a metaphor, *suspension*. Initially the paper outlines what waiting is and does in order to provide a touchstone when considering the feelings formed within new practices of waiting. It then outlines and considers what liquid suspension can open as a writing device. Then working with suspension and aligned concepts of surface and viscosity, the paper explores the morphologies of mood and sensation felt and shared within COVID-19 pandemic shopping queues. **Key Words:** affect, feeling, mobile phone, suspension, waiting.

“11.17hrs. 30th May 2020, DIY superstore, Tyne and Wear, England.

Purpose: electrical switches and planters for trees.

The man in front has a massive tattoo on his right calf muscle of a Yorkshire terrier’s head. The disembodied head is staring at me. It feels a bit uncanny. After thirty seven minutes waiting I am now number six in the queue. I overhear a phone call “Hello how are you? Yes to get my paint” says a woman in a white jacket blazer and black tailored Bermuda shorts. Tanned. Grey haired. I guess a retired professional. It is the only phone call I hear in the queue. Suddenly six of us are ushered into the store together and told to move quickly. A shop assistant offers me a trolley and reassures me that she personally wiped it with anti bac.”

The denouement of this scene of waiting illuminates a new virus aware form of queuing. A manner of waiting intensely alert to the potential for transmission of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and practices of mitigating its threat. It was observed outside a DIY superstore two months after the UK government lockdown was announced on 23rd of March 2020 (Prime Minister’s Office and Johnson 2020a). The lockdown was initiated in order to minimize the movement of people and reduce the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, which causes the COVID-19 disease (WHO 2020). A number of measures were introduced that disrupted practices of work and home life. Two meter social distancing rules changed how queues were enacted, elongating temporalities and creating new forms of bodily and material presences. New forms of spatial power evolved, determined by government policy and enacted through public and private spaces. New emotional resonances gained shape within tensions created amongst moments of uncertainty or of reassurance.

The COVID-19 pandemic (and ensuing government measures) made the people of the United Kingdom wait. As an event it enveloped and changed our social worlds. The UK went into lockdown, bodies became delayed, futures deferred. Non-essential work places stilled. Homes became spaces of confinement, escaped only for exercise or work or shopping deemed essential. Social distancing separated friends and families. Lives narrowed. Ambitions paused. The SARS-CoV-2 virus was a catalyst for mass waiting. And yet, we are always waiting. We are forever caught within a multiplicity of acts of waiting that we cannot extricate ourselves from (Hage 2018, 204). Waiting is a ubiquitous experience present within the interstices of everyday life (Gasparini 1995, 29). Nonetheless, we give acts of waiting little attention unless they rupture the flows and movements of our routine lives, like waiting for a delivery courier or painkillers to take effect. Aside from the movement from life to death, there are few waiting events that we *all* experience. As futures were postponed and suspended in the UK, we collectively waited for a new horizon, the peak of the pandemic to pass. Nonetheless, this was not the only new form of waiting we experienced.

This paper focuses on a phenomenon, a particular form of waiting observed in twenty two shopping queues between 23rd March and 20th June 2020, dates that coincide with the initiation of the first UK national lock down and the re-opening of non-essential retailing in England. The paper is an experiment, a speculative attempt at articulating *feelings* circulating whilst waiting within COVID-19 pandemic shopping queues. *Feelings* are the awareness that an affect has been “triggered” (Nathanson 1962, xiv). *Feelings* occur between *affects* which is that yet to emerge and be named, and *emotions* which have emerged and are known (ibid). In other words feelings are emotions in process of formation. Expanding this idea, I draw on Raymond Williams (1977, 132) who suggests that feelings are embodied thought, “thought as felt and feeling as thought.” For Williams, yet to emerge unknown *feelings* coalesce as social processes and can find form in the written word such as this paper. A multiplicity of feelings challenging to emerge at a certain point in time, may be deemed to be a structure in formation. Williams regards such *structures of feeling* as “social experiences in solution” (ibid, 132–134). Solution suggests a fluid emergence, a liquescence of experience. Lockdown feels like I am in a suspension. I feel like I am floating, unable to create momentum and move on. With this in mind, this paper is written through the lens of *liquid suspension*.

Suspension, in particular liquid suspension, is used as a narrative device in this paper to explore how I experienced feelings and sensations across twenty two observations made whilst waiting in shopping queues in the North East of England. The paper is divided into two parts and five sections. In Part I—Formation, the initial section “Pause” outlines what waiting is and does, in doing so the section acts as a touchstone when considering the new processes of waiting encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic. The second section “Suspension” contours what using a metaphor for liquid suspension can open when thinking and writing about feelings. The third section “Medium and Particulates” outlines the elements that constituted the *formation* of the observed queues, their temporalities, materialities, bodies and orientations. “Medium and Particulates” bleeds into the second part of the paper, Part II—In Suspension. The fourth section “Surface,” outlines concepts of surface and texture and how these ideas support an articulation of a particular mood, “matte,” that contoured the feelings across the queues. This section also conjectures why and how “matte” passed between people waiting. A fifth section develops ideas of “Viscosity” and through these concepts outlines how time and intensity of feeling were experienced in the queues. The sections are punctuated with fragments

of observational notes intended to provide some further illumination of the sites and people of the queues. The paper aims to firstly supplement cultural commentary of waiting within the new social worlds that emerged or are emerging as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Secondly writing with suspension and ideas of surface and viscosity enables an articulation of the embodied experience of waiting, which beyond this paper could prove useful to those writing about bodies confined or restrained through governmental regulation.

PART I—FORMATION

Pause

What is it to wait? There is no such thing as waiting in itself. Whether waiting for a text message (Farman 2018, 2) or a lover (Barthes 2002) or in a queue (Schwartz 1975), acts of waiting are always relational to context and expectation (Dastur 2000; Gray 2011, 241). They are reflective of the organization or structure in which they are enacted, whether administrative (Kiely 2021, 4; Secor 2007, 42), digital (Amoore 2020, 17; Farman 2018, 6) or as part of the life course (Flaherty 2019; Hughes 2021; Lahad 2017). It is the relational nature of waiting that makes paying it attention worthwhile. Waiting provides an opportunity to explore not just the interruption it makes, but what it is interrupting. As such the ontological status of the waiting body has been explored by geographers in a variety of social and economic conditions such as mobility (Adey 2006; Bissell 2007, 282; Conlon 2011, 253), employment (Honwana 2012; Thieme 2017; Ungruhe and Esson 2017), citizenship (Carswell, Chambers, and De Neve 2018; Mountz 2011) temporalities (Jeffrey 2008) and emergencies (Olsen 2015).

The Sars-Cov-2 virus and its infiltration of people and spaces, its local and global significance, its impact on economies and cultures makes it an appropriate subject for geographical enquiry. Throughout the pandemic geographic commentaries¹ emerged exploring a multitude of themes. These highlighted the ruptures that the pandemic had opened within everyday life and felt acutely by those who have contracted the disease, (Callard 2020a; Callard and Perego 2020b) or suffered loss through it (Maddrell 2020, 109). Existing situations of waiting such as for non-COVID 19 hospital treatment (Burton 2021, 221; van der Miesen, Raaijmakers, and van de Grift 2020) or travel across borders (Cole and Dodds 2020; Grydehøj, Kelman, and Su 2020; Iaquinto 2020) became protracted temporalities with unknowable end points creating potential harm for those being delayed. Aside from the disease's ability to severely interrupt the life course, it punctured the rhythms of everyday practices such as going to work or school, which when confined to the home created scenes of exhaustion and disparity (Iacovone et al. 2020, 126; Manzo and Minello 2020; Reuschke and Felstead 2020, 211).

During the first national lockdown new practices of waiting took shape. Along with millions of others in the UK, I waited to leave the house for daily exercise, for VoIP² technologies to connect me to loved ones, for twenty seconds to pass as I washed my hands, for the results of PCR tests,³ for daily television announcements about the progress of the virus by the government and within newly configured shopping queues. Shopping queues became one of the material indicators of the pandemic⁴; social distance marked out with paint or tape or stickers (Burton 2021, 219; van Eck, van Melik, and Schapendonk 2020, 378), extended lineups

creating elongated durations. As waiting is not just experienced as space and time but through the body (Bissell 2007, 291; Schweitzer 2008, 12) the new materializations and temporalities of retail queuing provoked new formations of feelings which are worthy of attention and are the focus of this paper.

For my part, I waited in socially distanced lines of my own free will. I did not strain against my detainment in the queues, instead I acquiesced and accepted their durations. Living alone in a new city with no meaningful connections, separated by significant geographical distance from friends and family, interaction with people was sorely lacking from my day to day living. Waiting in the queues was an opportunity to interact (or not) with people not on screens. Nonetheless I acknowledge that my experience of waiting in queues was underscored by not having to be there. I could have ordered my shopping online and had it delivered to my home. In some instances I made click and collect orders which I picked up in the store thus minimizing my time queuing. These forms of shopping are privileged by having access to the internet, a resource not universally accessible during the pandemic (Beaunoyer, Dupéré, and Guitton 2020, 2; Sanderson Bellamy, Furness, and Nicol et al. 2021, 791). I did not feel the strains of financial worry and so unlike those in food poverty did not need to shop in person for discounted products unavailable online due to their end of shelf life or “reduced cost” status (Power et al. 2020, 4). My queue experiences may or may not have been singular, without dialogue with my fellow shoppers I have no way of knowing. The observations of queues I noted were an opportunity to sublimate my feelings of floating and disconnectedness into a form.

Suspension

The problem was how to write and share *feelings* that were in some ways difficult to articulate. *Feelings* are animated by *affect*, part of a procession of emotional or sensorial becoming (Nathanson 1962, xiv). Within a given situation “affect” is an emergent emotional or sensory response (Thrift 2007, 175–177) or apparent and resonating in relation (Ahmed 2010, 27; Anderson 2006, 735; Pedwell 2017, 150). Affect is always mediated, in other words affect does not operate in isolation as it is encountered through bodies, practices, materials, and temporalities (Anderson 2009, 80; Berlant 2011, 4; Lorimer 2008, 552; Sedgwick 2003, 19). Although challenging to define, affect is something we know, feel and experience constantly. As waiting involves forms of relationality felt bodily as sensations, emotions, materialities, temporalities, and mobilities, *affect* either underpins or is connected to these conditions.

Elsbeth Probyn (2010, 74) suggests that “different affects make us feel, write, think, and act in certain ways.” That is to say that affect colors our experiences, orientating us toward specific forms of response. Within the confines of an academic paper such as this one, if the felt is to be shared, then it has to be articulated through the written form. I therefore agree with Margaret Wetherell’s (2013, 357) assertion that “affect cannot be neatly and surgically separated from discourse and representations.” The paper is influenced by writing that articulates affects and their relational force within ordinary situations (Ahmed 2010; Berlant 2011; Brennan 2004; Sedgwick 2003; Stewart 2007). To that end, in this paper I play with language and form in order to shape a representation of the feelings that I experienced. I acknowledge that some people reading this may have misgivings about an essayist style of writing that blends academic and creative writing, but in common with Kathleen Stewart (2018, 187) “I’m with the writing.”

In other words this mode of writing is something I intuit is the right one for articulating the particular feelings I experienced in the queues. A different context stimulating different affect would require a different approach.

With this in mind, I turn to a metaphor and the work of Timothy Choy (2018) who with Jerry Zee (2015) assert that chemical “suspension” can act as a signifier of a certain formation of experience. Choy (2018) uses gaseous atmospheric “suspension” as a mode of thinking and writing and in doing so uses airborne examples. Inspired by that approach, this paper considers the ways that *liquid* suspensions combine, move and adhere. In chemical terms, a suspension is a mixture of heterogenous particulates that combine for a period of time in a “fluid body” before dissipating (Choy and Zee 2015, 213). Fluidity here suggests a transit of states from separation, to combination to separation. A suspension involves holding and being held (Choy 2018, 58), like glitter suspended in water in a snow globe or flakes of chili in a bottle of olive oil. In common with waiting, their form and flow is relational to their containment or not. Suspension, is a device for forming a narrative around a subject (ibid, 58). It is a way of holding through the written form, phenomena that are multifarious in nature, both the formed and the unformed. As such, liquid suspension becomes an apt metaphor for the circulations of time, affects, emotions, materials and sensory responses I experienced whilst waiting confined within shopping queues.

Time, or more particularly the duration of the waits, will act as a *medium* holding the suspensions together. The *particulates* are the materiality, emotions and sensory responses encountered in the queues. The people in the queues and I become what Kathleen Stewart (2013) terms, “compositional nodes.” In other words, as fellow particulates we form coalescent points for an articulation of emergent feelings and sensations. Coalescence suggests a merging, a formation. As such, this paper and you reading it may also be deemed a point of coalescence.

Thinking and writing in *liquid suspension* firstly creates a space for feelings, materials, sensations, and bodies to be considered in particular *formations*. Secondly, it offers the ability for those formations to be viewed *pluralistically*. Thirdly, liquid suspension provides the opportunity to explore scenes of differing *intensity* of formation. Fourthly, it enables exploration of the conditions *around* as well as *within* a formation.

Medium and Particulates

As the *medium* holding the suspension in this paper is the wait duration, it is useful to summon a further example where time, materiality and abstraction are also employed. Henry Bergson (1911, 14) in “Creative Evolution” notes how time can be measured materially, through a vignette of waiting for sugar to dissolve whilst stirring it in a glass of water. The time the sugar takes to dissolve is not connected to “mathematical” time, but time becomes “something *lived*.” Bergson has no means to determine the length of time he has to wait until the sugar dissolves. The time is unknown and arbitrary, to be accepted and waited out. At the beginning of waiting in each queue I had no way of knowing how long my wait would be. I could count heads in front of me, or signage or social distancing markers on the ground, but the time it took to wait in the queues was always unknown and unpredictable. Like Bergson, I waited through unknowable durations.

At this point I must acknowledge that I am part of the waiting scenes. I am a particulate, observing as a participant in order to understand what queuing in a pandemic feels like first

hand and write about it. As a participant I follow the same orientation as the other people queuing, I wait with the intention of gaining entry to the store and making purchases. By being held in the queue, I experience what the other people experience. I acknowledge that by placing myself as an observer as well as a person in waiting, I am situating myself with additional purpose and experiencing the queues differently from the other people. In saying that, I make the assumption that I was the only researcher in the queues, this is something I of course have no way of knowing. As I wait out the lockdown alone, trips to the shops and daily runs are the only times that I see people other than on screens. For me there was a tension between wanting human interaction and having to be alone amidst a queue of people who I must keep distance from. To the other people in the queues I observe, I am a lone white middle aged woman mostly leaning over a shopping trolley or stood head down, tapping into my smart phone.

Having a presence in the queues and making notes on a mobile phone enables being and moving with the subjects of my observation. Peter Merriman (2014, 175) suggests that this form of researcher presence opens up forms of embodied knowledge making around the “affects and materialities” that form experiences. The notes I make are fragmentary representations of my queue waits, recording details and giving a general sense of each scene. Their depth is mediated by the length of the queue wait and the speed at which I can type. Typing into a phone was intended as a discrete way of making notes (Gorman 2017, 224) as interacting with mobile phones often plays a part within the backdrop of waiting (Bissell 2007, 281; Farman 2018, 25). Or so I assumed. Across the queues I observed, only a third of people were interacting with their phones. I was in the minority. Most people stared ahead impassively, or talked quietly to the person beside them.

“10:49hrs. 23rd April 2020 – Large Supermarket B, Gateshead, England.

Purpose: essential food shopping.

Waiting against the outside wall of Supermarket B again. Sun amplifying my shadow across the wall. Difficult to type with vinyl gloves that are too big, so I push the excess plastic down my finger. The strange choreography of waiting two metres behind and in front. Marked in peeling hazard tape on the paving stones. Man in front no trolley. Plastic bag. Baseball cap. Ruddy face. Thick gold wedding ring evident through his vinyl gloves. New black daps,⁵ one safely on the floor the other propping him against the wall. He looks at me with suspicion.”

Gorman (2017, 225) suggests that as making notes on a smartphone is visible, there is the potential to change the dynamics between the observed and the researcher. Only once am I aware of someone watching me as I make notes. I cannot tell if he is generally suspicious of me or of my typing into my mobile. We do not speak but he keeps me under observation as we wait outside a supermarket. The choice of recording my observations on a mobile phone was influenced by my assumption that doing so would be mirroring usual queue behavior. It became apparent that in a COVID-19 queue, this social norm was not quite playing out as expected.

The other particulate which must be mentioned, is the SARS-CoV-2 virus, which causes the disease referred to as COVID-19. The virus known but unseen, at the time of the observations its transference suspected as either airborne or through droplets on surfaces (UKRI 2020). And yet the elongated nature of the queues I waited in, was a material indicator of its presence. Like the bodies, materiality, affects, and emotions of the queue, the virus and the suspicion of its presence are further particulates. Particulates as liable to move and settle as the other particles the queue scenes envelope. Unlike pre-COVID-19 pandemic queues, which were in part reliant

on culturally learnt behaviors for their formation (Corbridge 2004; Moran 2008, 61; Schwartz 1975, 93), behaviors in COVID-19 lockdown queues were thoroughly delineated through markings and signage informed by UK government requirements.

As this paper involves waiting in shopping queues, before moving forward it is useful to make a distinction between queuing and waiting. Barry Schwartz (1975, 7) suggests that queuing is a “social structure” involving “elements” arranged in a certain order, whilst waiting is the “orientation” of those “elements.” That is to say, a queue is a structure, whilst waiting is an intention.

PART II—IN SUSPENSION

Medium and Particulates

“13.27hrs 16th of May 2020, DIY Superstore 1, Tyne and Wear, England.

Purpose: brilliant white emulsion paint, jasmine white masonry paint.

I order a ‘click and collect’ and drive three miles to get it. It is the longest journey I’ve driven in almost three months. The roads are not deserted. The approach to the DIY store is busy. The carpark is three quarters full, although a quarter of it is reserved and marked out for queuing. High high wooden garden fence posts set two metres apart, mark out the queue and required social distancing. Each post has a sign reminding those waiting of social distancing rules. Garden fence posts seem apt for a DIY-gardening store. The fence posts are linked together with yellow rope. I scan the queue and approximate that seventy five people are waiting in a queue that winds back on itself several times. Luckily I spot that there is a separate ‘click and collect’ queue with three people in it. One moves on as I arrive and I wait several minutes behind a chubby short guy wearing an upside sleep mask across the lower half of his face. The sun is hot but it is breezy so it doesn’t feel intense. So weird to be able to look out across the land and see the sea. This is the furthest distance I’ve been since the lock down. I have to be honest, I feel like going rogue and driving to the coast but this is against the government rules. I am beginning to feel trapped by the lockdown. I watch a male shop worker swab down the handles of the shopping trolleys. I note the fresh ones for when it’s my turn to take one. The guy in front has moved on. Not sure why, but it feels really nice to have the wind blowing on my face. It can do this in the garden but I think the sense of space makes a difference. I am signalled to go in. It feels like being in a VIP queue, ushered ahead of the masses.”

It is an odd scene. Seventy five people waiting outside a DIY store during a pandemic, potentially harming their health. Why are they here? Is it out of necessity or boredom or perhaps a form of resistance against being locked down or attempting a semblance of normality? I wonder if those waiting have adopted the position of “safe uncertainty.” Developed by family therapist Barry Mason (1993, 2019) to be used in therapeutic exchanges, the concept of “safe uncertainty” refers to an individual’s acceptance of uncomfortable or unsettling emotions after experiencing feelings of “unsafe uncertainty.” It is an unfolding, shifting, mutable perspective, relational to a situation and the people within it (Mason 2019, 347). After two months of lockdown rules, a form of tolerance for continuing uncertainty may have formed, creating the ability to queue in what some may consider as a hazardous situation.

Or perhaps after a period of disorientation created by the virus and the lockdown, the changing of routines and usual behaviors has required a distraction. A reorientation. The people in the queue may have been waiting in anticipation for this shopping trip, thinking of it as a positive future horizon against the enforcement of lock down. Sarah Ahmed (2010, 24) suggests that to be positively affected we position things we like and deem positive in our near vicinity and into our distant horizons. In other words we create happiness intentionally in our lives through the positioning of positive objects. If an individual finds pleasure in DIY shopping, then ignoring the hazards of queueing outside a DIY store amidst a pandemic may find some logic. The people in the queue might have been seeking a form of what Kathleen Stewart (2005, 95–96) terms “vibrancy in the ordinary.” In her article “Still Life” Stewart follows female friends who go on day trips in order to enliven their everyday lives through exchanges with people and objects. In lockdown, with movement restricted to circulations within households and limited access to the outside, then the promise of pleasure through shopping may be the lure to be in this queue. For my part I admit that the shopping trips were testing the limits of my feelings of safety, but the interruption to the monotony of my days that shopping trips promised overrode my feelings of uncertainty.

Surface

A liquid suspension is enveloped by a surface. The surface⁶ is what we see and immediately *feel* about what we see. Surface suggests a boundary, a limit. It is the margin between what is within and outside a form (Castati 2009, 382). Surface and form are relational, there is no surface without form. Surfaces of suspensions can yield and be turbulent like the top of a sea or hold form like the outer layer of a raspberry jelly filled with fruit. Surfaces always have texture. They can be undulating, curved, flat, spikey, regular, irregular, sticky or smooth. Eve Sedgwick (2003, 13) proposes that intensities of emotion, sensation, and feeling can be expressed as textures. Sedgwick suggests that thinking with textures as contours of involvement with the world, enables review of an experience, its unfolding and its imprint on the individual. In his article “Outing Texture,” Renu Bora (1997, 99) uses a lexicon of texture such as “shiny/matte” “smooth/coarse” “slippery/tacky” used to describe the exterior quality of an object or material, as an approach to expressing affective feelings. For Bora, emotional topographies are formed of surfaces and textures (ibid, 123).

“11.23hrs 13th June 2020, DIY Superstore 2, Gateshead, England.

Purpose: insulated electrical plug for a tumble dryer, replacement for one that caught fire. The air is heavy, it is about to rain. Petrol smells. Warm. No coat. Social distance marked by parking lines and red and white striped posts linked by red and white striped plastic chain. Silence. Two people behind me. ‘Exit This Way’ signs prepare me for where I leave this dance. “Go to Collection Point 2.” I enter the store and forget and overstep the yellow social distancing mark. I hold out my phone to show the order number. No talking. The assistant goes out to the warehouse returning with my plug in under a minute. I silently leave, mindful to go in the direction of the ‘Exit This Way’ sign.”

“16:05hrs. 20th June 2020 Motor Factors Superstore, Gateshead, England.

Purpose: windshield wipers.

The queue at the motor factors store is bifurcated into a bicycle enquiries queue and a motor click and collect queue. The queues run parallel with each other. Social distancing marked by short red lines spray painted on the ground. The two queues are separated by red and white plastic hazard ribbon woven across the top of permanent grey bollards with yellow bulbous tops. The queue is calm. The mood is patient resignation. No stress. Bird song. The sounds of cars driving through the car park. Some voices in the queue but no greater than a hum.”

The surface mood of quiet composure that I experienced whilst waiting in the queues, felt emotionally flat. It was like a form of waiting described by Roland Barthes (2002, 38) as “matte.” Matte implies a dulled unreflective surface. For Roland Barthes (2002, 38) in his account of waiting for a lover, waiting is an intensely anxious activity that he dramatically describes as violent, nonetheless it has “matte moments.” For Barthes “matte” is how waiting is felt when the violence of anxiety is removed. In further evocations of “matte,” Barthes (1975, 25, 43,109) uses the term to describe when emotions or sensations are ostensibly downplayed or minimized in the context of interactions with others. In the queues I did not encounter emotions generally associated with waiting such as impatience, intolerance, anger or anxiety (Farman 2018, 185; Moran 2008, 70; Schweitzer 2008, 4). Instead I experienced muted moods which are aptly described through the textural word, *matte*.

Particulates floating in close “proximity” in the same suspension, create an affinity with each other (Choy and Zee 2015, 215). The uniformity of *matte* that I felt across the queues suggests some form of *affective transmission*. Teresa Brennan (2004, 6) proposes that our individual affective energies are not confined and transmit onto other people and our surrounding situation. More than that, Brennan (ibid, 1) suggests that this transmission transforms the body and cognition of a subject. Transmission or “chemical entrainment” occurs through the olfactory system (Brennan, ibid, 9). Olfactory stimuli can provide an unconscious and instantaneous connection with others and our environment (Jones 2017b, 14). Such stimuli can include pheromones, air borne hormones that determine human moods such as stress and aggression (Brennan 2004, 69). Perhaps the matte feeling I sensed across the queues is underpinned by a collective olfactory sensing of calm pheromones. The pheromones part of the mixture of particulates floating with me in the suspension of the queue, a preconscious chemical sensing settling as a *matte* surface.

“11:43hrs. 29th April 2020, sub post office, Gateshead, England

Purpose: sending a parcel to my daughter.

A handwritten sign on the door says “Open as Normal. Only 2 [circled] Customers at One Time Please.” The shop bit of the post office is divided by a central set of shelves stocking sundry stationery goods and tinned foods. The other side of the shelves holds greetings cards. The left side of the shelves people wait. The right side people exit. On the floor to the left, two boxes are delineated by red and white striped tape. The man in front waits in the middle of his box. Like the movement of a knight in chess, he steps forward and right towards cashier number two. Like a pawn I move forward one. A woman enters the post office behind me. I am wondering if I should go to the left of the box and the woman behind to the right of her box to create more social distance. It is a passing thought I don’t act on it and keep still.”

The matte mood is made visible through the stillness of the people in the queues. Inner moods are revealed through an individual’s bodily posture (Ringmar 2018, 456). Body and mood, inner and outer are in relation. For an individual, a mood is an affective loop triggered

by a stimulus (Nathanson 1962, xiv). They are temporary and pass when disrupted by something else (*ibid*). The people in the queues and I are experiencing the same stimuli, held two meters apart, distanced by government requirements (Prime Minister's Office and Johnson 2020b) which keeps interaction to a minimum and bodies stationary. We stand still and face ahead impassively, *we embody* the mood of *matte*.

The minimal conversation and composure of the people in the queues was perhaps a form of watchfulness, a playing out of the government instructions to "Stay Alert" (Prime Minister's Office and Johnson 2020c). Conceivably those waiting have *decided* to act in a calm manner. Instead of the involuntary emotion suggested by Brennan's version of affective transmission, this is a scene of active compliance. Kathleen Stewart (2007, 16) notes that "There's a politics to being/feeling connected (or not) . . . to affective contagion, and to all forms of attunement and attachment." In other words, to decide to be part of something and behave the way that others do, or not. People comply within a social situation in part to avoid the disapproval of others and be seen in a favorable light (Kelman 2006, 3). In order to be *seen* to submit to government requirements and fall in the others, the people in the queue may be *enacting* a *matte* mood.

"30th May 2020. DIY superstore 1, Tyne and Wear, England.

Purpose: electrical switches and large planters for trees.

The queue moves more quickly than it looks. I am a third of the way round. The people in front move on too quickly and are stuck between waiting spots, cast adrift like losers in the game of musical chairs. My shadow falls half way between me and the couple in front. We are still socially distant . . .

The couple in front jump ahead again potentially marooned between waiting posts. I hold back to make sure they reach a fence post . . .

The couple in front really do not have a handle on queueing between fence posts. They are stranded in between fence posts again and not far enough away from me. They are too close."

"The couple in front" intermittently pull on the *matte* feeling of the queue. I am alert to their inability to comply with the social distancing markers, which creates small tensions that stretch and sag the uniformity of *matte* feeling. When thinking in suspension, Choy (2018, 65) calls anxious intensity around objects and sensations "reductive apprehension." A reduction, involves less liquid resulting in more particulate density (*ibid*). It is a closer form of involvement, just like the too close proximity of "the couple in front" and my shrinking from them. "The couple in front" leave me feeling indentations in the otherwise *matte* mood of the queue wait.

Whether *matte* was transmitted because of compliance with government requirements, through chemical entrainment or through a mirroring of the behavior of others, *matte* describes the *surface feelings* I experienced. However, the longer I was immersed in a queue the more I felt the weight of the passing of time. Tethered by government restrictions and the materiality of the queuing structures, I was not free floating. As such, my stilled body noticed a thickening of time.

Viscosity

"17:29hrs. 11th May 2020, Large Supermarket B, Gateshead, England.

Purpose: essential food shopping.

‘Estimated queue time from this point 10 - 12 minutes’ informs a laminated sign on the window of the car park underneath the supermarket. Yellow and black hazard tape on the ground demarcates two metre intervals between people. In front of me a middle aged man, black Darth Vader tote bag in hand. I stare at his back. Grey ponytail. Black leather jacket. Black Star Wars backpack. Black jeans. Black leather gloves. Black Star Wars socks. I guess he likes Star Wars. He turns around and reveals a beard dyed like a rainbow.⁷ Didn’t see that coming.

“This Way” a sign at the bottom of the escalator signals upwards. I have incrementally made my way twenty people forward. No distancing tape on the stilled escalator. The queue inches forward. I realise that I am moving slower because I am typing. An older man behind me also with a ponytail. Don’t think that this is lockdown hair, it is too long. I notice that Star Wars man in front has a neon green keffiyeh style scarf around his neck.

Near the top of the escalator I see that the queue curls around the edge of the super market. I won’t be going straight in. At the top of the escalator the hazard tape starts again. This is reassuring. Climbing free range up the escalator felt a bit insecure. A man has a black bobble hat pulled down just above his eyes and a mask pulled up just below his eyes, leaving a slit to see through. People in the queue wear masks and gloves but only a few.⁸ The minority. Most people in the queue are alone like me but there are pairs, mostly couples and mothers with children. Two metres doesn’t actually feel that far away. It seems close. How quickly I’ve adapted to distance. I keep accidentally leaving two gaps. One gap seems too close. On the concourse outside the supermarket the outer limit of the queue is delineated by a dusty fake fig tree which is taller than me.

The queue is slowly snaking its way around the front wall of the super market. I miss my cue again and leave two gaps. The queue atmosphere is calm and with low chatter. The hazard tape on the floor has become wider creating a more visible barrier between me and the person in front. I guess the change is because I am nearer the front of the queue, nearer the supermarket entrance. Seven people ahead of me. The top of the queue a red plastic crowd safety barrier. Now, only three people ahead of me. The Star Wars man is swinging his bag. I am ushered forward by a tall, male supermarket worker. There are a three staff congregating by a table outside the store. They look a bit stressed. I take a blue paper towel soaked in anti bac from the table, use it to wipe a trolley handle and wheel it in.”

Waiting in the queues felt unhurried, a liquid in slow formation, a stasis. Suspensions can be made in viscous liquids. *Viscosity* is a thickness, a density, an intensity. It creates resistance within liquids slowing their movement and formation. Water for example, has low viscosity. If I draw my finger through a saucer of water it moves with little opposition. The trace I make folds back into the water instantly. When I remove my finger, water clings to my skin but ultimately runs off leaving my finger as it was before submersion. My finger and the water quickly have no residue, no remembrance of our interaction. If I trace my finger through a saucer of olive oil which has high viscosity, the opening I create is slower to reform. For a few moments the finger trace is visible. The oil enrobes my finger and is slower to separate itself from me. The interaction between me and the oil lingers until I wipe the oil away. Viscosity suggests a slower temporal engagement between particulates within a suspension. It presents an opportunity to closely attend to how suspension flows and feels.

Bora (1997, 99) proposes a parallel concept to texture, “*texxture*” which involves words describing the innate structural qualities of materials such as “crunchiness, chewiness, brittle-ness.” In other words, its “substance” (Sedgwick 2003, 15). “*Texxture*” words have a deeper

involvement with an emotion or sensation than “texture” words (Bora 1997, 117). The longer I waited in the queues time began to *feel* like it had a *viscosity*, a denseness, a texture. In the context of grief, Lisa Baraitser (2017, 1) describes suspended time as “viscous liquid” noting that it coagulates and “pools” in a manner that brings to the fore a sense of temporal materiality. For Baraitser, in common with the queues, it is time without momentum. Denise Riley (2012, 31) on whose work Baraitser builds her version of suspended time, describes viscous time as like being held within an edgeless “globe.” Within this temporal immersion, Riley (*ibid*, 66) suggests that it feels like, “You *are* time.” This is a deep engagement within a situation, with feelings. This sense of being held is shared by Jason Farman (2018, 185) who notes that the viscosity of time during waiting in prison is a form of punishment, “time is meant to be slow and thick and noticeable.” Farman’s evocation of viscosity intimates a stiffened form of temporality, like wading through mud or chewing a toffee. I am not intimating that waiting in the lockdown queues feels like time stilled by grief or detention, but the waits do share the feeling of being *caught in time*.

“13.45hrs. 17th April 2020, Frozen Food supermarket, Gateshead town centre, England.

Purpose: frozen vegetables.

God I’m cold. The wind is blasting through the thoroughfare from the direction of the river. I can see Newcastle in the distance. Fingers red. Not enough layers on. Waiting to buy frozen vegetables. Fresh means going out of the house too many times. I have finally got to the bit of the queue where two metre distances are taped. I suggested to the woman behind me ten minutes ago that she was perhaps too close to me. I have slowly moved from fifteenth to second position. The end is in sight. Large square taped outside the shop. I am two positions behind. Couple in front are told one person per household. One in. One out. Shopping has become a dance. I’ve moved, I’m at the taped box. I can see the socially distanced shoppers inside the store. One out but the security guard doesn’t notice as he is helping an older woman shove her shopping into her tartan trolley. Eventually he becomes aware of me “Two minutes pet⁹.” I can see one person at the end of the first aisle. Then I am in.”

Although I felt caught within a thickening of time, surfaced by emotion that felt *matte*, I still sensed the velocity of anticipation toward things and exchanges at the end of waiting. Kathleen Stewart (2005, 91) suggests that a “still life” reduces experience into “liquid potency.” Outwardly subdued but inwardly teeming with reverberation and intensity. This must be so, otherwise waiting in a queue would be just marking time. I am not sure an individual would wait outside a supermarket or DIY store for a protracted amount of time during a pandemic and then not enter. I for one viewed entry into the stores as an event I anticipated even if I was just queuing to buy an electrical plug or frozen vegetables. For me waiting in the queues was a temporary suspension of a lockdown experience that otherwise felt like I was simultaneously tethered and cast adrift.

RESIDUE

“15:35 hrs. 18th July 2020, DIY superstore, Tyne and Wear, England.

Purpose: border plants.

A bustling Saturday afternoon. The car park is busy and feels pre-COVID-19. The fence posts, ropes and other queue paraphernalia has disappeared from the car park. It is no longer apparent where the queue once stood.”

Due to their time limited status, all suspensions eventually dissipate. The matte feeling of the lockdown queue has disappeared from the carpark, replaced by lively exchanges and movement. Time no longer feels viscous and dense, it has resumed patterns of flow that feel familiar. The first UK national lockdown, was a period of mass waiting in unknown and unknowable conditions. Since its lifting in June 2020, the UK population has moved in and out of national and regional variations of lockdown (Institute for Government Analysis 2021). However, I have not observed similar matte moods or felt a density of time or felt suspended in the same way in subsequent lockdown queues.

This paper has attempted two things, to both foreground and find a way of expressing the feelings provoked by waiting in retail queues amidst the pandemic. I presented multiple *suspensions*, primarily the queues (people, feelings, materiality particulates suspended within time as medium) but also the paper (my thoughts and you held by the time it took for you to read them). As the latter suspension starts to separate, what has the paper opened around feelings that formed amidst queues within the first lockdown? Shopping queues which in pre-pandemic times passed as minor inconveniences, became a material indicator of the pandemic through their extended durations and new forms of corralling and delaying bodies. I have speculated that people adopted a version of safe uncertainty in order to orientate toward and undertake the everyday practice of shopping within known hazardous conditions. Whether the individuals that I shared the queues with were shopping in person to access cut price essential food, to shake the boredom of lockdown or to experience a semblance of normality amid the ongoing strangeness of the pandemic, you and I will never know. We stood in queues in quiet acceptance amid a pandemic where for others waiting for non-COVID medical treatment or to cross borders or to return to school or be reunited with loved ones was felt in an adverse way. I have no way of knowing the multiplicity of waiting experiences that the other people in the queues were simultaneously enduring. What I did bear witness to was a *matte mood* felt across twenty two shopping queues, enacted collectively through quiet, stilled bodies. Whether the matte mood was formed and shared through preconscious sensing or an active display of compliance or both or neither is conjecture on my part. If acts of waiting are indicative of their context, I offer the suggestion that the matte mood was simply what compliance with government restrictions looks and feels like in a time of heightened uncertainty.

Choy and Zee (2015, 217) suggest that writing “suspension is an opening,” a form of “becoming-open.” Within this paper, suspension has helped unfurl a particular articulation of feelings. The concept of suspension consists of holding and the held, in common with bodies in waiting. Suspension is therefore, a useful strategy when thinking and writing about detained and deferred bodies caught by a force outside themselves. Eve Sedgwick (2003, 13) suggests that thinking in texture instigates two questions “*How did it get that way? and What could I do with it?*” The paper has attempted to address these questions, the former seeding a series of speculative thoughts around why the feelings manifested the way they did in the queues. The latter opening space for exploration with language and form and render the embodied experience of waiting in a written form. As affective feelings are difficult to define and articulate precisely because of their amorphous nature, writing with texture provides a mode of paying

attention to and expressing contours of experience. Waiting through COVID-19 has opened new forms of feeling, which in turn need new strategies in order to articulate them.

NOTES

1. Collections of geographic commentaries of the COVID19 pandemic are published in *Dialogs in Human Geography* 2020 Vol 10 (2), *Geographical Research* Volume 59 (2), *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* Vol. 111 (3).
2. VoIP or voice over internet protocol technology such as Zoom, Teams, Skype, Whatsapp, Facetime.
3. Polymerase Chain Reaction tests known as PCR tests are taken by individuals with symptoms of COVID19 (UK Government n.d.a).
4. The retail outlets in the observations marked the UK Government requirement for two meter social distancing with stickers, hazard tape or spray paint (UK Government, n.d.b).
5. “Daps” is a Welsh vernacular term for plimsols or sneakers. My usage of the term in my observation notes reveals my origins. Oxford English Dictionary s.v. “dap,n2” accessed December 7, 2021, www.oed.com/view/Entry/47236.
6. Surfaces have been a conceptual focus for geographers, notably in the 2013 special issue of *Environment and Planning A-Economy and Space* (Forsyth et al. 2013) which featured work involving surface and global geopolitics (Martin 2013), territorial control (Forsyth 2013; Robinson 2013), materials and the body (Colls and Fannin 2013; Paton 2013) and the metaphysical (Maddrell and Della Dora 2013). A 2017 special edition of *Theory, Culture and Society*, “Visualizing Surfaces, Surfacing Vision” (Coleman and Oakley-Brown 2017) presented “surface” work from across the wider social sciences, on body image (Jones 2017a), non-visibility (Day and Lury 2017), patterning as knowledge (Küchler 2017) and haptic perception (Ingold 2017).
7. The rainbow became a symbol of hope during the first lockdown. Children’s paintings of rainbows appearing in domestic windows was reported widely in the UK media (BBC 2020; Metro 2020). The origin and initiation of this are unclear.
8. The wearing of masks in public spaces was not mandatory in the UK until the 24th of July 2020, a date after the observations were made (Department for Health and Social Care and Hancock, M 2020).
9. “Pet” is used as an informal form of address in the North East of England. Oxford English Dictionary s.v. “pet,n2 and adj” accessed December 7, 2021, www.oed.com/view/Entry/141778.

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