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A swan song

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Figure 1

29th February 2020, a leap year. I pack my bags with Tuija, my spouse, and get ready to catch the bus to Helsinki airport. We are headed, eventually, to Epirus in Northwestern Greece, after two flights, an overnight stop in Thessaloniki, and a long drive. I will be spending a few days doing pilot ethnographic fieldwork there with a colleague, Aspasia Theodosiou, in an area I had last worked in during the early 2000s. After that, I will be participating in a week-long intensive workshop with a research team that is working across several sites in the Mediterranean region. It is an exciting prospect, this workshop; we are getting towards the end of the project and planning a new one, and we have a lot of brainstorming to do together. I wanted to show the team this place, Epirus, where the ideas that led to the project we are now working on together had developed. And I wanted to show it to Tuija as well, as I had talked about it so much, and she had never been there. Tuija, a philosopher, political historian and gender studies professor, was also on a work trip, commenting on the research team's developing ideas for our research during the workshop.

The week before, we discussed whether to go ahead with the trip, because of this novel coronavirus that nobody was calling Covid-19 as yet. The research team and I weighed the risks: the problem, we concluded, would be the airports and the flights; there was no record of any infections in Epirus as yet. I bought hand sanitizer and cotton gloves, as well as some disposable gloves from the local chemist in Helsinki. There were no shortages yet; not of those items nor of toilet roll.

At Helsinki airport, we stood in line with no social distancing and noticed a group of Italians in line with us. We did not move away from them (and I remember wondering if it would be an act of stereotyping to do so), but we did ensure we wore gloves whenever we touched anything in the airports. I emailed a colleague about that, and he wrote back saying he thought that perhaps I was being a little over-cautious. The airport was almost empty, even then. It was eerie; I normally visited the airport around twice a month; I had never seen it so empty in the middle of the day like that.

When we were in Epirus, we checked the news daily about Covid-19, and some of the places we visited had hand sanitizer at the entrance. But people still shook our hands when we visited them, and our hosts regularly offered us coffee. We were there for this year's Apokries (carnival) season, and although the planned parade was cancelled because of Covid-19, we spent an evening in a packed bar eating snacks and listening to live music, with a slight sense of hesitation, but not a very strong one. Still, the March 6th book launch planned for the Greek translation of *Notes from the Balkans*, an ethnography I had published about the Epirus area, was cancelled. The publisher said: most of the people who come to book launches are older people, and he could not take the risk.

The visit to Epirus was a little surreal; everyone was on edge about this virus, even though Greece was managing remarkably well with it. While we were there, Italy was warning about going into lockdown, first just the northern part of the country, and then the whole country. At the time, we did not even know what that meant, how it would work. It was unimaginable.

March 11th, 2020. We returned to Helsinki, the same day that the WHO announced

that Covid-19 was a global pandemic. We left one of our colleagues in Thessaloniki, as she had some work to do there, and she said she would follow on and join us in a week. She is still in Thessaloniki as I write in November 2020. Another colleague headed straight to Spain, where he was in the middle of ethnographic fieldwork. Within days, he had to make a mad dash for the Portuguese border by taxi in order to catch a flight from Lisbon back to Helsinki before all the Spanish borders were closed. He made it just in time.

When we got back to Helsinki on March 11th, nobody checked on us at the airport, we just walked out and caught a bus home. I attended a doctoral defence on March 14th, ensuring that I stayed at least two meters away from everyone. But from then onwards, I attended no more in-person events, and a state of emergency was announced in Finland for the first time in its history on March 16th. I have visited my office twice since that time. I stopped travelling. I developed ways of working at home, trying a variety of methods to keep up routines, schedules and structures for separating work from not work. I learned to make a sourdough starter and then sourdough bread, just from ordinary flour and water, before realising that half the rest of the world was doing that too. We began ordering our groceries online. Hand washing became a constant routine, as did avoiding getting within two meters of anyone.

In the early days, I was still planning events and trips that might take place in May or June. Even though I had studied the history of pandemics and epidemics as part of the background to my current research, and so I knew these things had always lasted between 18 months and two years in the past, it was unimaginable that we would continue to live like this for more than a couple of months. I'm used to it now.

6:15 a.m. 25th September, 2020. It's dark when I wake up, a big change from the spring and summer, when the dawn light always managed to slip through the closed venetian blinds and spread in thin lines across our duvet. I get up, change into my running gear, do my floor exercises, pull on my trainers and throw myself out of the door into the crisp air. It's not raining today. There is less traffic but more people out on foot than there used to be before Covid at that time of day, walking their dogs and exercising like I was. Some of the runners seem professional, and I imagine that they have decided not to visit their gyms as much as they used to do. I feel both pleased to have company, so long as it is at a distance, but also mildly bemused that the only people I meet in person other than Tuija these days are these strangers with their dogs and their Lycra.

Part of my most regular running route includes Töölö bay. There has been a drama playing out there for several weeks, and I realise that I have turned my ethnographic attention to it, perhaps trying to compensate. A couple of swans, locally called Alvar and Aino, have been visiting the bay every year for around 15 years (nobody knows exactly how long), to build a nest and hatch cygnets, raise them and then fly off for the winter. Alvar and Aino were reported in the local papers regularly, and each year, their new cygnets, between five and seven each year, became the centre of attention around the beach at the southern end of the bay. This year, Alvar died after being wounded in a fight with another swan, leaving Aino alone with seven cygnets who could not yet fly. There had been an attempt to save Alvar: he was taken to the city's

zoo, where he was treated, but it was too late.

This set off a series of events and a flurry of commentary in local Facebook pages and a couple of stories in local newspapers. The lives of both Aino and the cygnets were in danger, readers were informed, because other swans are likely to try and drown cygnets accompanied only by a single adult swan. Quite quickly, a local ecologist who had been at the zoo when Alvar died (and witnessed his death), set up a group that would take turns going out into the bay in a rowboat in order to create a distraction between aggressive adult swans and Aino and the little ones, until such a time as the cygnets were old enough to fly and leave the place. It would take weeks of more or less 24-hour vigilance, but without this support, it would spell almost certain death for some, if not all, of the cygnets, and perhaps Aino as well.

Some commentators in the media suggested that this was too much interference, that nature should be allowed to take its course. In a conversation with Tuija, the ecologist disagreed; she noted that this bay fundamentally included humans and their activities, which was therefore natural to it. Almost every aspect of the place was affected by the fact that it is located right in the middle of the centre of Helsinki, a stone's throw from the parliament and the offices of the biggest newspaper of the city, *Helsingin Sanomat*. In any case, she noted, she was simply rowing the boat into the bay when some adult swans were getting too close, which acted as a distraction.

The story was irresistible to me: for decades, I have been researching issues related to space, place, location and borders. More recently, I have been studying how people get involved in the movement of animals across borders, and how they get involved in controlling the spread of the diseases that the animals carry. And here was an open drama playing out in front of my eyes while I was being grounded by Covid-19.

By the time I arrived at Töölö bay during my run on September 25th, I had been watching the swan drama for several weeks. The sun was rising, and as I turned and caught sight of the bay, I saw a rowing boat with two people in it already out in the water, rowing along a line between Aino and the cygnets, and a pair of swans to the south of them. The ecologist told Tuija that Aino realised the boat was being protective, and often came close. The cygnets had by that time reduced from seven to six, as one of them had some cognitive difficulties and was taken to the zoo to be cared for. The remaining six were growing fast, and I watched them as I ran around the bay, sometimes sleeping under a tree by the water, sometimes swimming around behind Aino, often eating something beneath the water. Very occasionally, I would see a potential skirmish between a visiting adult swan, the boat and Aino and the six-pack, but mostly everyone kept to their side of some invisible line. Over time, I began to recognise exactly where the border was in the water, the one that the young ones must not cross or they would be challenged or attacked by a pair of adult swans that had taken up residence in the southern end of the bay.

By the following week, the last week of September, the ecologist was becoming exhausted, as she could not find enough volunteers to take turns on the boat, and the cygnets, although they were now almost bigger than Aino, had not yet begun to

fly. And the situation was getting hard: more adult swans had arrived on the scene. Things were getting tense.

October 4th, 2020. Another run which ended in sunrise in Töölö bay. As I turned the corner to look into the water, I spotted seven large birds flying in formation from the west shore to the east, into the rising sun, before landing in the water. As I ran around the bay towards the eastern shore, I realised that the birds had been Aino and the six-pack: the young ones had begun flying school. It was a magical sight. Over the next ten days, Tuija and I occasionally spotted them practising before finally seeing them take off over the railway tracks and go to a different bay before, about a week later, finally leaving Töölö bay. We have not seen them since.

Ethnography, for me, is a way of thinking, a way of seeing. Even during this strange period of Covid-19, I found a world open out to me in Töölö bay that I had never been aware of before. I have been running around that bay for eight years, and I had never paid attention to what was going on in the water. It taught me something about the work I am doing elsewhere on the way people and animals come together in moving across borders. It was inspiring, literally.



Figure 2

Sarah Green is a social anthropologist based at the University of Helsinki. She specialises in the anthropology of location, particularly in terms of borders, space and place, and has carried out ethnographic fieldwork on the Greek-Albanian border, in the Aegean region, and in the UK. She is currently working on an ERC Advanced Grant called Crosslocations (see <https://www.helsinki.fi/en/researchgroups/crosslocations>)

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