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Rupture, repetition, and new rhythms for pandemic times: Mass Observation, everyday life, and COVID-19

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Abstract
The COVID-19 pandemic has foregrounded the significance of time to everyday life, as the routines, pace, and speed of social relations were widely reconfigured. This article uses rhythm as an object and tool of inquiry to make sense of spatio-temporal change. We analyse the Mass Observation (MO) directive we co-commissioned on 'COVID-19 and Time', where volunteer writers reflect on whether and how time was made, experienced, and imagined differently during the early stages of the pandemic in the UK. We draw on Henri Lefebvre and Catherine Régulier's 'rhythmanalysis', taking up their theorisation of rhythm as linear and cyclical and their concepts of arrhythmia (discordant rhythms) and eurhythmia (harmonious rhythms). Our analysis highlights how MO writers articulate (a) the ruptures to their everyday rhythms across time and space, (b) their experience of 'blurred' or 'merged' time as everyday rhythms are dissolved and the pace of time is intensified or slowed, and (c) the remaking of rhythms through new practices or devices and attunements to nature. We show how rhythm enables a consideration of the spatio-temporal textures of everyday life, including their unevenness, variation, and difference. The article thus contributes to and expands recent scholarship on the social life of time, rhythm and rhythmanalysis, everyday life, and MO.

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Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic has upended people's lived experience of the everyday and the 'shape of time' (Kubler, 1962) that constitutes it. A resurgence of intellectual interest in time and temporality across the social sciences and humanities both prior to and during the pandemic complicates and critiques assumptions of time as an evenly unfolding, sequential, universal, deterministic, and linear backdrop to the social and natural world (Bastian *et al*., 2020; Ruse *et al*., 2022; Sharma, 2014; Suckert, 2021; Wajcman, 2015). If acceleration has been widely argued to exemplify modernity (Rosa, 2013), the COVID-19 pandemic has been described as 'the great pause' affecting economic activity, noise pollution, and everyday routines (Edensor, 2022). However, while meta-narratives are helpful for capturing epochal shifts, they tell us little about the 'multiplicity of temporal textures and rhythms' (Wajcman and Dodd, 2017: 9) that are part and parcel of the everyday. Working with qualitative empirical material about the lived experience of the pandemic allows us to attend to relationships between the pace, shape, and texture of time as it is made and remade in the everyday (Thomson, 2014: 39).

In this article, we focus on rhythm as an object and tool of inquiry to make sense of the changing relations of mobility, stillness, and confinement made and experienced during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, which arose from the global spread of SARS-CoV-2 from late 2019. Rhythm is a generative middle-range concept (Stewart, 2014: 551) that helps disentangle different dimensions of broader concepts of time and space (Amit, 2015). We work with the 'rhythmanalysis' of Lefebvre (2004[1992]) to explore unevenness, variation, and difference in both space and time; in short, the ebb and flow of everyday life. In collaboration with the Mass Observation Project (MO, http://www.massobs.org.uk/) in the UK, which asks volunteer writers (referred to in this article as panellists, correspondents, and writers) to 'record everyday life in Britain', we co-commissioned a 'directive' on 'COVID-19 and Time' in summer 2020, asking correspondents whether and how time was made, experienced, and imagined differently during the pandemic. The written responses are both intensely personal fragments of life and public accounts through which we can trace larger social processes (Mills, 1959).

We start by discussing how rhythm and rhythmanalysis enable us to grasp experiences of everyday life, then set out the status of MO responses as a mode of 'time writing'. We present our analysis of the responses around three interconnected themes. First, we explore the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic as a rhythmic *rupture* through accounts of disruption, or time halting, stopping, or freezing, coupled with spatial confinement. Second, we consider everyday pandemic experiences of time as *blurred*, as well as changing relations between speed and slowness, and linear and cyclical rhythms. Third, we discuss *sustaining rhythm* in pandemic times through time-making devices and practices and new connections to nature. Overall, we show how attending to the experiences of

time recorded by MO writers generates new understandings of the COVID-19 pandemic and contributes to scholarship on the social life of time, rhythm, and everyday life.

Rhythm and rhythmanalysis

Rhythm has attracted the interest of scholars across the humanities and social sciences (Crespi and Manghani, 2020; McCormack, 2013). In sociology, it has largely been explored as one dimension of time, or, in Barbara Adam's work, as a 'timescape' (Adam, 1998, 2004). In Adam's work, *rhythm* is perhaps best equated with *temporality* as a processual, changing, cyclical character of everyday life. It sits alongside *period* or *frame*, *tempo* (speed), *timing* (scheduling), and *modality* or *past–present–future continuum*. In an alternative if overlapping conceptualisation, Gary Fine (1996) distinguishes between 'periodicity', which he associates with rhythm; tempo (rate or speed); timing (synchronisation); duration; and sequence. Dale Southerton takes up Fine's dimensions to develop 'a conceptual framework for the systematic analysis of temporal rhythms' informed by a theory of practice (Southerton, 2006: 436). In more recent work, Southerton (2020) explores how rhythms are formed or reproduced, starting from 'practices' as the key object of analysis. He argues that 'activities are configured together into practices through which socio-temporal rhythms are formed, and it is through the performance of those practices that rhythms are reproduced' (ibid.: 148). He draws on the work of French philosopher, sociologist, urban scholar, and literary critic Henri Lefebvre (among others) to describe different types of rhythm, but does not mobilise the potential of 'rhythmanalysis' (Lefebvre, 2004; Lefebvre and Régulier, 2004[1985], 2004[1986]) to capture the subtle interplay of different types of rhythm in their broader constellations.

In this article, we take up Lefebvre's formulation of rhythm and associated practice of 'rhythmanalysis' (developed with Catherine Régulier) as a means to identify rhythms as they occur in and pattern everyday life and to explore how rhythm constitutes the everyday. In *Rhythmanalysis, Space, Time and Everyday Life* (2004[1992]), Lefebvre adds a temporal dimension to his long-standing analyses of space to explore capitalism's 'invasiveness' into leisure, rest, and everyday life as well as work (see also Lefebvre, 2014[1947, 1961, 1981]). Rhythm, therefore, is not a purely temporal concept but one that brings space and time together. Linear rhythms refer to undifferentiated sequences in time and space, such as the monotony of industrial work; in contrast, cyclical rhythms are concerned with the repeated changes of the seasons or day into night, marked by 'difference' as well as repetition. Discordance or jarring in time and place or between rhythms is captured by the notion of 'arrhythmia', whereas 'eurhythmia' refers to the smooth or harmonious experience of space–time unfolding. In practice, these rhythms combine to create differentiated polyrhythmic constellations, which comprise relations, connections, and/or 'interferences' between the linear and the cyclical.

The practice of rhythmanalysis has attracted significant interest in recent decades, especially in geography and urban studies (Degen, 2008; Edensor, 2010; Smith and Hetherington, 2013; Lyon, 2021). From 'a speculative invitation to think rhythmically' (McCormack, 2013: 42), it has been developed as a 'strategy of inquiry' and a 'sensitising concept' (see Lyon, 2021). Yet rhythm is both a concept and an object of analysis. Here,

we think with rhythm to explore the multiplicity of spatio-temporal lived experience, draw out specific rhythms that shape and emerge from the everyday in the responses, and consider how rhythms combine to create different constellations.

Time writing: Data generation and analysis of Mass Observation responses

Much has been written about the status of MO written reflections (see Hubble, 2006; Savage, 2010), casting individual writings as micro-ethnographies (Highmore, 2010) and the panellists as participant observers attentive to the textures of the everyday as they ‘bear witness’ to it (Kramer, 2014: 5.1). The writers have what Anne-Marie Kramer (ibid.) calls a ‘dual vision’, writing about their own experiences in the knowledge that their accounts are subject to observation by researchers, and writing of themselves in social worlds of which they are also observers. The archive thereby offers a ‘collective or multiple autobiography’ (Sheridan, 1983, cited in ibid.: 4.5), giving readers access to accounts of social change in the making. Following Ben Highmore (2010), we value the responses as dynamic, inconsistent, heterogeneous, and offering a multiplicity of views. Many have a ‘grappling’ quality as they seek to capture a ‘live present’ in the context of the unfolding pandemic. They offer ‘fragments’ or ‘small stories’ about ‘mundane things and everyday occurrences’ (Bamberg, 2006: 63), which ‘point to’ unfolding tendencies and emergent forms of sense-making.

Our ‘COVID-19 and Time’ directive[1] was sent to panellists in August 2020, following an MO ‘special directive’ issued in March 2020 after the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 a pandemic, and a ‘COVID-19 Update’ directive in spring 2020. We invited panellists to ‘look back on your experiences of time and COVID-19 so far, consider what it means to you for life to get “back to normal” (if it is) in the present day, and imagine what you think the future might hold’. We asked specific questions on daily rhythms and routines; ‘homelife’; the use of media, technology, and other devices for making and marking time; and the experience of waiting or life being ‘on hold’.

The directive stimulated a strong response. We received electronic copies of the 228 submissions, which ranged from a few lines to eight pages, in late 2020 and early 2021. Most were typed, some were handwritten, and several included images. We do not analyse the writings according to their socio-economic characteristics, but share details of the sample for transparency and to note that the data is not representative of the UK population and thus does not encompass all experiences of the pandemic. There are more than three times as many women as men ($n = 161$ [70.6%] vs 49 [21.5%], with 2 non-binary and 16 unknown). While the age categories of 60 to 69 and 70 to 79 each contain the most respondents, just under half (46.1%) of the sample where age is declared is under the age of 60. In terms of age, the characteristics of the panellists coincide with a group that is vulnerable to COVID-19 and offers a distinctive voice on the experience of the pandemic. The sample is evenly split between those in paid work (or seeking work) and those who are retired (45.6% vs 46.1%, with the rest either homemakers [2.2%], students [3.1%], or unknown [3.1%]), figures that align closely to age, with less than 5% of those active in the labour market being 60 or over. Middle-class writers dominate, with 22.3% of those where details are known in (or previously in) higher managerial/

professional positions, 19.1% in intermediate occupations, and 28.6% in lower managerial/professional positions. Where location is known, more than one quarter (27.4%) of the writers are based in London or the South-East, with a further one in eight (12.9%) living elsewhere in the South; close to one third are based in the Midlands (31.8%); and one in six (16.4%) in the North West or North East. The writers in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland combined represent a further 10.0%, and a handful of writers are resident abroad (the latter have been excluded from our analysis here). At the time of our directive, MO did not ask panellists for information on their sexual or ethnic identification (although some people refer to these) – an important omission given the relevance of ethnicity in the experience of the pandemic, and more generally in light of attempts to decolonise and diversify sociological research (Mirza and Arday, 2018).[2]

Handling and analysing MO data is widely recognised as challenging (Pollen, 2013). While we have read some of the responses in their entirety and pored over the extracts coded by the project researcher, Corine van Emmerik, in the qualitative software package NVivo, the material is too voluminous and unwieldy for us to feel confident that we know it all; indeed, as a collective autobiography it is unreadable in its raw state, and voices, moods, and experiences come to be heard through a careful process of attention and selection. We devised some initial codes to 'look for' based on the structure of the directive and our early reading of the responses, and we 'listened for' (Cook, 2020) other themes and insights to identify clusters of concerns, patterns, repetitions, and intense 'moments' (Thomson, 2014: 40).

Notwithstanding the distance between writer and reader in working with MO responses, attention to ethics remains vital. Working with people already engaged in MO writing was ideal for this project, as we did not wish to burden participants during the pandemic; this also allows us to contribute to a public archive. To this end, we use the codes attributed to panellists by MO (included only with the first quotation by that writer) so others can trace the material shared here, avoiding pseudonyms that run the risk of inadvertently identifying the writers. We share biographical details included in the submissions, substituting specific locations for the county or city to maintain anonymity. Despite the 'temporal lag' between the writing and the reading of the responses and a lack of direct contact with the writers, we were struck by the sense of them entrusting intimate experiences to us and felt an 'ethics of care' towards them – as well as towards the researcher in her intense encounters with the material. In practice, this meant contacting MO to trigger their duty of care processes when we were concerned about the well-being of a writer (see van Emmerik, 2022).

Overall, our methods allow us to both 'grasp' and 'perform' time through cultivating an attentiveness to it in reading the responses, and showing the understanding of time – our own and the MO writers' – as an active creation (Harris and Coleman, 2020). Following Julia Bennett in her discussion of using reflective diaries for rhythmanalysis, we consider the responses to be effective for grasping rhythm and offer the 'present-but-outside perspective that rhythmanalysis requires' (Bennett, 2015: 960–1), allowing us to explore the shifting patterns of everyday life across three key rhythmic relations, around which this article is structured: rupture in time and space; blurring, repetition, and speed; and sustaining and reattuning to rhythm. We present multiple voices as a textual montage (Casey, Courage, and Hubble, 2014), which is both an intensified description and an analytical form. This chimes with the early style of MO, inspired

by a surrealist approach to capturing 'images' of social change as they register at the level of the everyday.

'I was stopped in my tracks': COVID-19 and the rupture of everyday life

Experiences of the early days of the pandemic, especially the unfamiliar regulation of everyday time and space through lockdown rules, are widely expressed as a temporal shock by the correspondents. They write of being immobilised in both time and space as the Coronavirus Act (2020) restricted circulation beyond people's localities and encouraged the population to limit outside activity to once per day. As many people lived and worked from home, domestic routines and spatial configurations also became sites of activity and contest. We discuss our readings of these experiences in two parts in this section: pandemic time as a rhythmic 'rupture', and spatial confinement and the dissolution of rhythm.

Pandemic time as a rhythmic 'rupture'

The phrase in the title of this section – 'I was stopped in my tracks' – written by a '78 years "young"' woman (A2a, Female, 78, Divorced, Surrey, Retired Accountant), conveys a sense of her energy being halted by the pandemic. Lefebvre writes, 'Everywhere where there is interaction between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy, there is rhythm' (Lefebvre, 2004[1992]: 15). And without the momentum of this energy there can be no rhythm. Disruption, or time halting, stopping, or freezing, are mentioned by many writers and communicate a similar sense of rhythmic rupture. 'In March, time stood still', writes L7501ab (Female, 49, Divorced, Staffordshire, Project Coordinator for Community Organisation); for others, 'many of the usual activities that gave my life structure [including history research, family visits, shopping] just suddenly came to a halt' (M6790ab, no information) and 'COVID19 has brought all these [family reunions] to an abrupt halt' (B7306a, Female, 87, Widow, Essex, Retired Manager of Local Citizens' Advice Bureau). 'The whole situation has left me feeling frozen in time, so that I cannot plan to do anything and am not motivated to be busy and energetic', B7306a continues.

The panellists bear witness to travel plans cancelled and leisure activities 'paused' – and sorrow at events and people missed. In some cases, the change in the patterning of the everyday was connected to sudden, specific restrictions: 'The first thing that changed was not being able to visit my mother in her care home', explains C3691a (Female, 55, Married, Norfolk, Local Government Officer). This commitment had previously shaped her day, leading her to start work early to be able to 'get to Mum's room in time to watch *Neighbours* with her and then have a chat' or to stay at work later, 'until 6.30pm on other days to make up my flexi-time and get my work done'. For another writer (T6740a, Female, Married, no further information), the experience of 'waiting for my husband to come home' from prison preceded the pandemic but her pattern of visiting at least three times a month stopped under lockdown rules. 'To go from that frequency to nothing, was hard', she writes, as she laments the loss of a temporal structure.

M7452ab (Female, 34, Married, Kent, Research Manager) describes in detail how the rhythms and routines that structured the life of her family revolved around the school day, until the onset of the pandemic: 'This all came to an abrupt end on Wednesday 18 March 2020, when the school contacted me to pick up O, due to him exhibiting a fever and cough, which, as per the government guidance, meant that as a family we would then be required to self-isolate for two weeks in order to try and help contain the virus.' As for others, 'life completely changed form' (P7590a, Female, 72, Married, Cumbria, Retired Company Secretary). 'Those first few weeks were hard. My routine had completely gone and I felt lost' (B3635a, Female, 44, Engaged, Essex, Homemaker). P7552ab (Female, 74, Widow, East Sussex, PA and Researcher) writes how 'daily life suddenly seemed to become alien' as familiar patterns or rhythms unravelled. She emphasises the lack of control she felt, 'as though dictated to by an unseen hand: which indeed it [daily life] was. There was a sudden withdrawal of agency.' Social psychologist Michael Flaherty uses the term 'time work' to refer to the taken-for-granted capacity to 'shape the personal experience of time' (2011: 8), and we hear in this account how this was diminished early on in the pandemic.

If the pandemic has brought about a form of rupture within the present – and, as we discuss elsewhere, in relation to the future (Coleman and Lyon, 2022) – for many of the writers, it also involves a present experience of separation from the past. Several writers reflect on 'how everything before COVID seems so long ago' (D4736a, Male, 54, Married, Hampshire, Air Traffic Control Assistant) to the point that 'March 2020 seems a dream now, so long ago, the first days of lockdown, so strange' (C7383, Female, 61, Married, Merseyside, Retired Senior Manager at Local City Council). For P3209a (Male, 80, Married, East Yorkshire, Artist), 'just looking back to the first days of the lockdown seems a very long time ago; five months feeling like a year or more'. This disconnection from the past, disturbance in the present, and uncertainty about the future amount to a sense of time as 'more elastic' (D7076ab, Female, 52, Married, Buckinghamshire, Outdoor Education / Forest School Leader), lacking its usual framework or tethering, including a sense of being 'less anchored in time, I suppose', as M3190ab (Male, no further information) eloquently articulates:

> The COVID19 pandemic has certainly affected me, but at what you might call the surface level you wouldn't know it just from looking at me. It's affecting me most at what for lack of any better term I'll call 'deep time': the temporal framework within which we live our lives and locate our experiences and form expectations.

Others too feel disconnection, either from previous routines or from the emerging rhythms of lockdown activities around them. As neighbours 'went mad with DIY' in the house or the garden, the 'drilling, scraping, banging, shouting' was 'awful' for P5842ab (Female, 42, Married, North Yorkshire, Poet, Author, Workshop Facilitator), still working, now at home. Worse, though, was 'the general panic among parents … about making this time special', leading to a 'sort of constant chatter about children on the social media sites I use and the noise outside'. This writer, unable to have children following the death of her daughter, 'felt very much on the outside of everything', belonging in neither time nor place. For P7500a (Female, 52, Married, Herefordshire,

Student, Former Retail Assistant), the time of grieving following the unexpected terminal illness of her father was disrupted. Not able to go away as planned after the funeral, she wonders: ‘I am not sure there will ever be space now, it is as if I have missed my slot and think I will just get used to having not grieved.’ ‘So many aspects of life have changed that it has become almost impossible to locate them all on the same timescale’, writes S6835ab (Male, 78, Widower, Derbyshire, Retired Town Planner), referring to everyday routines and to ‘the death of my wife[, which] now seems to have taken place ten or more rather than three and a half years ago, even though the impact has hardly lessened’.

Alongside painful and problematic experiences of pandemic time, some correspondents record a sense of joy and appreciation at their release from obligations and responsibilities. As B3227a (no information) writes:

> Previously when I had booked a week or fortnight off work, I would attempt to hoard my days of freedom, calculating how many I had left, working out the exact halfway point. Time is experienced differently when what we have is an apparently unlimited supply.… I can let it run through my fingers instead of begrudging the expenditure.

In other cases too, there were those who felt that ‘rather than waiting, I had been set free’ (A5854ab, Female, 75, Married, Somerset, Artist) and appreciated the opportunity to ‘have a break’ (P7032ab, Female, 49, Married, London, Student and Teacher), or even just ‘a leisurely breakfast outside in my garden’ (A2a). For many, though, this did not last. Relaxation turned to boredom and clarity to confusion: ‘After the strict restrictions were relaxed I lost that feeling. I was confused about what I was allowed to do [and] what not, still am’ (A5854ab).

While the MO panellists write of the varying ways in which daily life altered at the beginning of the pandemic, there is widespread reflection on a break in ordinary routines. Our rhythmanalysis therefore highlights the arrhythmia of everyday life and enables us to attune to how this is experienced in terms of the present being abruptly paused and a felt temporal disconnection in which past rhythms become strange.

Spatial confinement and the dissolution of rhythm

Lockdown measures imposed by the UK government in spring 2020 were explicitly spatial, imposing limits on movement beyond people’s immediate locality, the requirement to work from home wherever possible, and the delivery of education online by teachers and/or parents in the home. As indicated in the expression we used to start the discussion in this section, being ‘stopped in my tracks’ (A2a) is also a spatial metaphor, and rhythm is as much spatial as temporal (Lefebvre, 2004[1992]).

While some writers were ‘happy and occupied at home’ (W6757a, no information), for most, ‘stay at home’ measures during the first period of lockdown in the UK were existentially, emotionally, physically, and relationally challenging, echoing research on the loss of everyday mobilities during the pandemic (Nikolaeva *et al*., 2021). With outside exercise permitted once per day, people comment that ‘the rhythms of daily life were quite disrupted as all one’s time was spent at home’ (K7050ab, Male, 36, Surrey, Civil Servant). Without travel to and from work or the spontaneity of ‘popping out to the

shops', K7050ab notes, the usual moments and movement that punctuated the day, week, and year were lost. 'Suddenly to be faced with enforced time indoors was daunting', comments S6840a (Female, 61, Married, Leicestershire, Retired Special Educational Needs Teaching Assistant). 'How would we manage to fill the days indoors?' she continues, expressing the 'very real fear' that 'S' would become depressed, especially after a difficult and recent transition to retirement, where 'to just "get out"' was a helpful tactic. Conveying a sense of shock and incipient despair, J5734ab (Male, 35, Single, Tyne and Wear, Charity Worker) writes, 'I suddenly had entire days to fill without leaving the house' as a result of both sick leave and furlough.

There were some positive reflections on 'daily walks around the locality' in terms of improving fitness and discovering new areas (K7522ab, Female, 66, Married, Northumberland, Legal Manager) and small pleasures, such as travelling by bus when 'only the driver and me were on board. My own "stretch limo"' (A2a). For many, however, the 'world has *shrunk*', and the experience of simply not being able to leave the house was 'shattering' (A6936ab, Female, 69, Widow, Bristol, Retired Civil Servant; emphasis in original). While some writers share that they 'feel a bit tied down' (T3155a, Male, 72, Married, Derbyshire, Retired Vehicle Mechanic), there are others who 'have become slightly agrophobic [agoraphobic] about going even to a shop or Sunday worship' (P7535, Female, 78, Widow, Oxfordshire, Retired Teacher and Welfare Officer). For L7501ab, used to travelling around with her 11-year-old daughter, being in one place 'is starting to feel claustrophobic', a feeling compounded by a move 'to a town where we don't know anyone'. New yearnings for escape from 'a 5 mile radius [of my village]' surfaced: 'I also found myself longing to see the sea', writes L7173a (no information), while T7449a (Female, 72, Divorced, Yorkshire, Retired Teacher) reports having started to 'imagine that I will never again see the sea'. D7076ab captures her sense of confinement powerfully: 'Looking back it seems an oddly bubbled time – like a snow globe with us inside it.'

Urban space was also reconfigured. W6667a (Female, 76, Married, London, Retired Acting Teacher and Play Director) writes that despite living 'on the outskirts of London', 'it is closed to me as are its museums, galleries, theatres, historical buildings, parks etc'. For another writer, taken on a tour of London by a friend in their car, 'to see the city almost deserted and so quiet, was very sad, surreal. Used to seeing the hustle and bustle, when the city was "alive"! I felt I had to whisper, as though entering a church' (A2a). At a smaller scale, pavements and streets were equally reshaped, with A2a recounting that 'I would zigzag up the road to our local shops, crossing the road if someone was approaching' – a familiar choreography of the early days of lockdown (Edensor, 2022). A2a and other writers also comment on the changed rhythms of residential streets filled with 'so many deliveries'. Supermarkets and other essential shops permitted to be open during lockdown were 'marred by restrictions, walking around folk as if they have the plague' (T3155a), following – or ignoring – 'the arrows telling them which way to enter/leave the shops' (A2a).

An increase in domestic violence during the pandemic reveals domestic space as an ongoing site of gendered contest (see e.g. Bradbury-Jones and Isham, 2020; Grewal *et al*., 2020). There are allusions to coercive control in some of the responses,[3] as well as explicit instances of everyday power struggles over time and space. For some,

household routines had to defer to, or be ‘calibrated with’, a dominant rhythm (Sharma, 2014). Some panellists write about such rhythms in gendered terms, with the dominant rhythm being associated with the move of paid work previously done by men outside the home into the home. For P7032ab, whose husband was working from home with ‘meetings at set times’, this meant the ‘quiet in our dining area’ that he needed ‘has been the most important event that has dictated time in our lives’, including for their children ‘home learning’. T7415a (Female, 49, Married, Nottinghamshire, Speech and Language Therapist) now had to do housework ‘in dribs and drabs’ on her day off when her husband was working, instead of ‘rattle[ing] through the chores in one go’. She could no longer ‘hoover if he’s on a video call’ or ‘iron in front of the TV’. While some studies of gendered work within some heterosexual households during the pandemic suggest a slight decline in the responsibility taken by mothers for domestic work and childcare (e.g. Chung *et al.*, 2021), others indicate that unequal gendered relations were widened, with mothers disproportionally increasing the time they spent on unpaid labour (e.g. Zamberlan, Gioachin, and Gritti, 2021). Several women also lament the lack of time to or by themselves, the inability to have ‘a quiet evening doing whatever I wanted’ (T7345a, Female, Living With Partner, 36, Yorkshire, Mental Health Social Work Charity Trainer), or the struggle to take a daily walk, ‘when I got to really be on my own’ (B3635a).

If disjuncture is already integral to ordinary routines as they falter as well as flow, the pandemic measures have created a dominant form of arrhythmia in the present whereby activity – actual and desired – keeps coming up against limits and regulations. For Lefebvre, the disruption of crisis produces ‘a hole in time’ (2014[1947, 1961, 1981]: 44). The writers discuss feeling the shock of the absence of rhythm as the pandemic measures upset multidimensional connections to past and future, as well as unsettling the present. Our focus on ‘rupture’ shows the mundane ways in which the arrhythmia of the pandemic concentrates attention on this loss of rhythm, making it strange and visible, and highlighting its fragility and centrality to everyday life (Graham, 2014; Trentmann, 2009).

‘I find the days merge’: Blurring, repetition, and speed – the changing composition of everyday rhythms

Building on our exploration of the temporal shock of the pandemic, especially as the first lockdown took hold in the UK, in this section we examine everyday experiences of time as ‘blurred’, tracing how from a moment of arrhythmia at the outset of the pandemic, the extended experience of undifferentiated time weighed heavily. As Lefebvre explains, rhythm requires repetition but it is difference, as ‘something new and unforeseen that introduces itself into the repetitive’ (2004[1992]: 6), that is key for rhythm. Public discussions of ‘blursday’ and the anthropause (Edensor, 2022) quickly became a narrative form in which people could recount their own sense of a lack of rhythm, and at least half of the MO writers refer to merging, blurring, or drifting, often through illuminating reflections on the changing ‘shape’ of time, arising from a lack of distinction across the week, day, or night. We go on to consider the changing relations between speed and slowness brought

about by the pandemic and the associated relevance of linear and cyclical rhythms. Overall, for some writers, 'acres of time' brought new and joyful possibilities, while for others 'endless repetition' meant a life without differentiation in time and space.

'A sea of grey': Relentless repetition

As lockdown unfolded, people's hold on time lessened and their rhythms unravelled. 'Initially as everything closed down, I was facing long days that all merged into each other', writes W6994a (Female, 60, Somerset, Carer). From a week 'usually punctuated' by commitments to two choirs, exercise, and work, as well as socialising with friends, 'suddenly there was nothing apart from trying to take a daily walk for exercise and sunshine'. At the other end of the spectrum of activity, for P5842ab, time 'has been one big, merged blob of work'. This was partly a tactic to deal with the anxiety of the pandemic, she acknowledges, allowing her to focus wholly on the recognisable anxiety of work 'rather than the mysterious pandemic with its undefined edges'.

Overall, there were powerful statements about the lack of punctuation points or structure in the day, week, or month. 'For the past nine months', writes W7422a (no information), 'every day has bled into the next. There's little distinction between them and unless a task is urgent, it's simply not getting done, as it feels like I have plenty of time.… I simply couldn't tell you when I did a particular thing, or when something occurred, as I seem to have no time "landmarks" to measure activities against. I've no real timeframe.' Without the differentiation that makes rhythm possible, the monotony of sameness or repetition loomed large, with writers noting that 'every day became the same monotony' (P7590a) and 'every day became identical' (S3035ab, Male, 73, Married, West Sussex, Retired Business Banker), characterised only by the 'boredom of endless repetition' (P7552ab), and making multiple references to 'groundhog day'. 'I feel we're on "hold" at the moment', continues P7552ab, 'rather like an aeroplane circling round and round and not going anywhere. We're in limbo.' For B7515ab (Female, 56, Married, Greater Manchester, Digital Forensic Investigator) – from whose words the title of this section is taken – time was disrupted because many of the ordinary markers of life had disappeared, from choir to 'just going out'. 'Looking back', she writes, 'it's rather a sea of grey, everything merging into everything else'. In these reflections the writers echo the tension discussed by philosophers between the everyday as a 'gray, aesthetically impoverished existence' and one that is 'connected to bodily and affective rhythms and hence retains a utopian impulse' (Felksi, 2000: 79).

The lack of differentiation within the day and the week is as much spatial as temporal. As W4925a (Male, 59, Married, Gloucestershire) writes, 'I have been working from home so this has meant that I often feel that all days merge into one and it is often difficult to remember what day it is.' 'I find I sit at home more and its [*sic*] depressing', writes C7383, in part because she gained weight, she explains. 'I find the days merge, I think a Sunday is Monday or a Saturday is Friday', she continues, noting that she relied on a series of lists, diaries, and calendars to retain a temporal hold. There are numerous similar statements from other MO writers. While some 'hardly know what day or date it is' (L7594ab, Female, 82, Married, Essex, Retired Infants Teacher and Ofsted Nursery Reporter), or are 'often a day "out"' (G226a, Female, 79, Widow, Lancashire, Retired

Writer/Counsellor), for others 'the first weeks were something of a blur' (S7592ab, no information). Having been furloughed, J5734ab experienced 'a sort of merging of time', where 'the distinctions between days, in particular, became a bit vague'. Instead, time was defined around commitments and simple activities such as going for a walk.

Without usual routines and rhythms, days and nights also lost their distinction for many. Occasionally this was positive, and relaxation and sleep were improved (e.g. M6790ab), and several writers found a way to start their days earlier than previously and enjoyed the quiet (e.g. T2004a, Female, 71, Married, Hampshire, Retired Family Court Advisor). However, there were more accounts of 'sleeping late' (W3048a, Male, 61, Single, Wiltshire, Semi-retired), 'struggling to get out of bed' in the morning (F6959, Female, 20, Single, London, Student), a 'less regulated sleep pattern' as a result of unsettled nights (B7084ab, Female, 62, Married, Dorset, Retired Senior Research Fellow), and generally 'going to bed later, sleeping in, mealtimes drifting' (G6209ab, no information). This led to a lack of motivation, as 'time just slips away without me noticing where it's going' (F6959), or to a 'discombobulating effect' (M6807a, Female, 57, Civil Partnership, Devon, Local Government Telecare Alarm Centre Operator). Those most severely affected by insomnia were 'jittery and depressed' (S7592ab). In one case, where the writer describes themselves as 'someone with ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, insomnia, and formerly with chronic depression' and their relationship to 'organised, societal time' as 'tenuous', 'any normative sense of order or structure wrt [*sic*] time I had established over the course of my later 20s has gone out of the window, and I now find myself beholden once again to my insomnia' (F5746ab, Male Non-binary, 31, Single, London, Engagement Research and Delivery Officer).

The feeling of weekends losing meaning and distinction was common: 'When you are stuck at home with nowhere to go, having two days at a weekend where you are still stuck at home still with nowhere to go has little meaning', writes R7168ab (Female, 53, Married, Worcestershire, Administrator). For P5842ab, they were simply 'no longer relevant', since 'there is no end to the week'. Weekends, for R7138a (Female, 34, Single, Yorkshire, Estates Operation Manager), 'have always felt long because I live alone, felt as if they went on forever'. Bank holidays too were 'pointless', P5842ab continues: 'We seem to be in a state of constant flotation, drifting without purpose or with the edges of the land always moving. Everything is unstructured.' And without structure, pattern, or rhythm in time and space, people felt 'as if everything was stuck, nothing moving forward, an endless present of days to be filled', in which 'the only "good" waiting was waiting for vegetables to grow and fruit to ripen!' (W6994a).

As we have already seen, the panellists are immensely insightful about the time of the pandemic, vividly articulating its contours and textures. They discuss how a simple activity – a walk, a shop – 'gave the day a shape' that helped alleviate a tendency 'to drift' (T7415a). For N6622ab (no information), adjusting to part-time work or retirement in the case of his wife, 'our time turned "inward"'. For those both working and home-schooling, 'time felt like it took on an odd and new quality'. In this instance, busyness meant that the 'hours just slipped away and before I knew it, it was time to prepare yet another meal' (M7452ab, Female, 34, Married, Kent, Research Manager), and that 'it felt in some ways like the same day was just running on and on', with M7452a feeling as if she were 'almost living outside of time': 'Time had been suspended in our little bubble. Our world just became just the five of us, within our own four walls.' Several correspondents write of feeling

trapped, 'like a fly trapped in amber' (G7105ab, Female, 50, Divorced, Kent, Invoice Clerk). These accounts point to a desire for rhythm, reveal the ways in which rhythm usually pervades everyday life, and show how without it, life is dull and monotonous, making it difficult to simply keep going. For H6804ab (Female, 64, Widow, London, Doctor and Psychotherapist), 'time itself has lost its usual rhythm.… Where has the time gone, where is it going?' And for R7226a (Female, 72, Widow, Merseyside, Retired Civil Servant), 'as the weeks turned into months I found time hung heavy on my hands. I've tried to develop some routines but that fell by the wayside early on.'

Speed and slowness, linear and cyclical rhythms

There is a strong emphasis on time having slowed in the responses, and for many writers, this was experienced, initially at least, as positive. The hold of linear time had loosened and there was space for other ways of living and for being more present in the everyday. There are accounts where the writers report having relished the opportunity to organise cupboards, drawers, or photographs, read more novels than at any other time of their lives, paint, draw, knit and sew, learn a foreign language, and, more existentially, reconsider their priorities.

For A7000ab (Female, Solicitor, 61, Lancashire), 'life was definitely slower and gentler then and the weather was lovely. Women friends were posting on Facebook about how relaxed they felt and wasn't it wonderful?' M6807a appreciates the enforced slowing of everyday practices in the pandemic: 'It's [queuing] slowed the pace of life down a little which is a good thing really.' Others too, state that they were 'actually quite happy with the present rhythm of things' (B3227a) when living at a slower pace, and that they 'really enjoy[ed] the lack of pressure to do anything' (B7306a). And even if they wished for a return to some usual activities, they also wished for less 'durational rigidity' (Zerubavel, 1981: 7): 'I must admit that I don't feel that enthusiastic at the prospect of having to get up slightly earlier and actually be somewhere on time. Generally I slowed down' (H1705ab, Female, 69, Widow, Jersey, Retired Amateur Artist).

Equally, the writers share their experiences of time having slowed to the point that 'some days seem interminable' (D826a, Female, 70, Widow, Bristol, Retired Social Worker) and 'having a long day stretching out feels hard' (T7415a). At times this is a general statement; at others it is connected to specific demands: 'Shortly after lockdown, I was furloughed by my former employer and suddenly my days had very little structure and a great deal of stress trying to entertain our son in the house with limited stimulation whilst my husband worked all day. The days were very long and hard' (N7498ab, Female, 38, Oxfordshire, Solicitor). Echoing the lack of distinction in time discussed above, B7306a writes, 'Looking back over the past five months my principal feeling is that the pace of my life has slowed down and that days and weeks have merged into a formless continuum.' Some draw parallels between illness, retirement, and lockdown, echoing themes in existing literature (see Bauger and Bongaardt, 2016; Leder, 2021): 'How to fill long daytime hours, now mostly spent indoors' (H6004, Male, 66, Married, Retired Civil Servant, West Yorkshire) and 'I have not really felt as though my life was on hold – it had been for two and a half years anyway, due to having chemo and then recovering' (A7000ab, Female, Solicitor, 61, Lancashire).

A strength of MO responses is the way they capture the variety and multiplicity of time. In contrast to the accounts we heard above, other writers experienced acceleration. ‘I think that during this strange time since March 2020, my life actually sped up (apart from the first week or so that I was in a bit of a fog)’, writes B7496ab (no information). For W7312ab (Female, 51, Married, Derbyshire, Academic Notetaker), ‘the time does seem to have passed very quickly. It is bizarre because only the other day I said to a family member that it feels as though we went to bed on 17th March and woke up in the middle of August!’

The sense of time passing was confused by a lack of temporal reference points, which made it difficult to track, and acceleration or slowing, while relevant, do not adequately capture the panellists’ experiences of time. Slow days combined with fast weeks or months for S7094a (Female, 50, Married, Yorkshire, Teacher Trainer), who writes, ‘There was so much to be processed. It felt as though part of one was still back then, part was in the moment and part was racing ahead to “what if”.’ For R1025a (Female, 77, Married, Buckinghamshire, Retired Book Keeper), ‘time has taken on a very strange quality. The year is flying past, when we really expected it to drag but it’s more than that. It’s as if we’re not living in real time at all, we’re in a sort of limbo and this year just doesn’t exist. We struggle to remember what day of the week it is, or even what month.’ R7168ab is uncertain about ‘whether time feels like it’s slowed down or speeded up. In many ways 2020 feels like it has sped by. It’s been a very strange year for all of us and life feels very different to what it did back in say January.… Equally the individual days feel long and one week merges into another.’ For M6815a (Female, 41, Married, West Midlands, Charity Worker), ‘it’s funny but in a way time seems to have flown as I can’t believe that it’s been six months now since this all started. Individual days, however, seem a lot longer.’

Some writers eloquently capture the multi-directionality of time, their reflections more nuanced than overarching claims about deceleration in the pandemic: ‘There is a disordering of time, it is no longer linear as there is no clear direction in which we are headed. It is as though time has become circular instead. Perhaps more here, less oriented to the past or present’ (H6804ab, Female, 64, Widow, London, Doctor and Psychotherapist). For others it was variously stretched or condensed. B3227a (no information) writes, ‘Time sometimes seemed to circle back on itself or to drag its heels confusingly (“Wait – didn’t that already happen?”).’ The arrhythmia experienced as the blurring or merging of time that we heard about earlier in this section made rhythm impossible and left the writers feeling that time remained suspended beyond the initial temporal shock of the pandemic. Their reflections indicate that smooth rhythms, or eurhythmia, are actually key to the production of a positive sense of time as linear and progressive (contra Lefebvre) and do not always involve being caught up in the relentlessness of undifferentiated time.

Sustaining rhythm in pandemic times

If time is dissembled as rhythms are lost, it can also be remade as new rhythms become possible. In this section, we discuss the panellists’ accounts of sustaining rhythm in pandemic times in relation to time-making devices and practices, and the changing composition of everyday rhythms connected to nature. While the usual temporal markers of days

and weeks changed during the pandemic, objects and technologies were deployed in novel ways to generate new forms of time-making. We examine these temporal, material practices that variously involved abandoning calendars and planners and exploring the ‘liberatory potential’ of devices to mark time in the context of crisis (Bastian, 2017; Wajcman, 2015; see also Adam, 2013; Birth, 2012).

Everyday practices of ma(r)king time: Clocks, calendars, and other devices

Many writers remark on how their usual ways of marking and organising their time became useless at the outset of the pandemic and during periods of lockdown. Calendars and diaries in particular were suddenly ‘redundant’ (R7168ab) or conspicuous for ‘a lot of empty space’ (P3209a; O7362a, Female, 59, Married, Somerset, Former Public Sector Manager and Web Platform Founder). ‘After a few weeks of lockdown, I took the calendar down from the wall and threw it away’, writes S7592ab, who felt that there was little point in marking the days. ‘I haven’t used a calendar since March as there’s nothing much to do’, echoes B1752a (Female, 72, Widow, South Wales, Retired Branch Librarian). There are similar remarks about diaries, ‘abandoned’ as ‘useless, everything crossed out’ (W6994a), or about going ‘many months without checking my diary’ (P7032ab). A diary ‘empty of commitments’ meant that T7449a simply ‘stopped bothering to open it’. There is more variation in relation to clocks and alarms. If, for some, days started later and ‘we rarely need to set an alarm these days as any appointments are few and far between’ (B7546a), others deliberately ‘set the alarm for 6am to gain more time at the beginning of the day for a walk, reading or a side project’ (M6737a, Female, 47, Married, Devon, Planning Enforcement Officer), seeking to retain a hold on/in time.

Debates on time and modernity in the social sciences and humanities have been extensive, tracing the development of clock time associated with industrialisation – the factory and railway in particular (Thompson, 1967). For some writers, Lefebvre included, the quantified, linear time of capitalism, imposed by technology, labour, and/or consumption, parcels and shapes the day and year, and takes over the body’s ‘natural’ rhythms until everyday life has been ‘colonised’ by this fragmented and monotonous time. More recently, criticising the elision of clock time with capitalist control, Larissa Pschetz and Michelle Bastian (2018) have argued for a recognition of the complexity of the social relations of clock time and for new forms of temporal design. The loss of ‘hidden’ institutionalised and informal social rhythms that bring people together (see Zerubavel, 1981) leads to a diminished sense of the shape of time, and the responses reveal how calendars and diaries/planners, often associated with more than records of linear time, are rich, flexible, material practices of time-making and synchronisation (Wajcman, 2019). Despite not performing their usual planning functions, they remained important for writers to sustain awareness of the succession of time in terms of days and weeks and being part of the collective rhythm of the year. ‘We started putting a line across the date on the calendar so she [partner] could see where we were’, writes M6807a; similarly, S6835ab states that ‘only my new electronic clock which shows the day in large letters, as well as date and time keeps me aware of where I am’. For A2a, the ‘odd’ problem of ‘losing’ days led her to start ‘marking off the calendar hanging in the

kitchen'. And T7449a 'developed the habit of consulting a battery-operated box which I bought for my mother many years ago: press one button and a pleasant male voice tells me the time, and press the other to hear the day and date'.

Furthermore, some writers created new practices of marking time through regular, sometimes shared activities. M6749a (Female, 64, Married, Oxford, Retired Administrator) has a history of depression and was 'terrified' of having no structure during the pandemic. 'I found organising my time immensely comforting', she writes, explaining that this offered her a hold in a sense of collective rhythms of lockdown: 'Without the structure I would have been anxious at not doing some "productive" activity, and at using my time differently from everyone else (feeling the odd one out).' Reading, watching, and sharing the news loomed large as markers of the day, especially the late afternoon government briefings of the early days of the pandemic, or simply keeping the radio on. Using lunchtime breaks for exercise or taking daily walks first thing worked for others, and shopping or occasional 'events', such as getting a flu jab or going to the dentist, would 'break up the days a little' (M6897a, Female, 66, Single, Living With Partner, London, Retired Civil Servant). Scheduling Zoom coffee breaks with neighbours established a new and 'pleasant' routine, as D6836ab (Female, 70, Married, Suffolk, Retired Teacher) explains: 'Because this is set at a specific time of day, then I am made more aware of the time, so I aim to be ready online for the 11am call.' Making lists was also common, although O7362a found that 'I don't need to actually write it down', as there were fewer things to record of what she and her partner were going to do. Accomplishing tasks was helpful, as was simply 'construct[ing] a sort of timetable' that involved a 'theory' behind the sequencing of activity: 'things I don't like doing – housework, gardening, decluttering', followed by 'exercise – no problem for me as a former PE teacher' (A6936ab).

Since 'days of the week are now useless to me', writes H7228ab (20, Male, Single, Berkshire, Student, Chinese/British), meaning they were not imbued with the usual temporal distinctions, he 'treat[ed] all days the same', punctuating his time instead with webinars or networking 'scheduled for a certain day'. P6988a (Male, 60, Married, Cumbria, Retired Prison Officer) reflects, 'The only event that brought us back into focus was Thursday morning, when the bins were emptied, other than that a week could easily have held nine days or six.' Cooking different dishes was the basis for new rhythms or people tethering themselves to a weekly pattern: 'I devised a weekly menu with particular items such as muesli, or fish on particular days so I would have an extra reminder as to the day of the week', writes B6659a (Female, 67, Widow, East Yorkshire, Retired Lecturer). Many people also refer to regular meals – in some cases, a habit engrained from 'working lives responding to school bells' (L7594ab). For M3462a (Male, 36, Cohabiting, Cardiff, Charity Policy Manager), 'mealtimes have also introduced a new rhythm to our days and we've eaten lunch and most other meals together'. M3462a and his partner found they 'chat[ted]' more 'about how our work days are going', which meant that in the evenings and on walks, there was space to 'talk about other things'. In some cases, divisions of labour were reconfigured; for instance, for B6560ab (Male, 62, Married, North Yorkshire, Retired Headteacher and Education Consultant), who was retired and whose wife was working at home, 'my job was to take on the role of tea-boy and chef'.

'Food and naps' were already central to B3635a's routine with her daughter. During lockdown, also with her partner and his two sons, the days were carefully shaped around

the different activities of home-schooling, work, care, mealtimes, walking, and cycling. 'Thank God for toddlers', writes T5903a (no information), who recounts the timetable of her day: get up, get dressed, breakfast, play or walk, snack, nap, lunch, play or walk, dinner, lights out. 'I think without him I might well just drift into a blur', she continues, remarking that 'it is very alienating to feel you are not in sync with the rest of society in such a fundamental way'. We noted above that the majority of the MO panellists are aged 60 and over and that fewer than half are in paid work. However, a number of younger correspondents present their reflections on juggling work with childcare and home-learning, which they found very challenging when schools were partially closed. For example, C3210a (40, Female, Hertfordshire, Civil Partnership With One Five-Year-Old Son) and her partner devised 'what will ever more be known as the "Corona shift". One of us worked from 7am–1pm while the other one was with C and we switched over 1–8pm.' In practice, there was tension between the linear arrangements of their timetable and lived slippages as activities and responsibilities spilled over into other times and spaces.

With the easing of restrictions (if not for all) in the UK towards summer 2020, many writers found they needed to 'reinstate' diaries (W6994a) to regain temporal awareness by 'properly recording things again' (D7076ab) after missing appointments or confusing arrangements. Some writers felt 'thrilled to be putting a few things in the diary again' (C6574ab, Female, 55, Married, Oxfordshire, Knowledge Broker), which emphasises the appeal of rhythm in everyday life, but perhaps not a 'return to normal'. 'Lockdown gave me a taste for space', writes T7449a, and she now makes new claims to her time by 'drawing red lines through several days each week in my diary to remind me to protect them'. If the threat of arrhythmia 'devolves to produce an unwanted disorderliness' (Edensor, 2022: 265), the pandemic 'moment' (Lefebvre, 2014[1947, 1961, 1981]) may turn out to have exposed 'slippages and gaps' (Amit, 2015) through which different ways of imagining the everyday have become possible.

Tuning into the rhythms of nature

R7226a, 'still adjusting to retirement when COVID-19 happened', found that 'time doesn't really have as much meaning as it did pre COVID-19'. Nevertheless, she developed a new appreciation for the rhythms of nature during lockdown: 'Sometimes I quite like not having to clock watch, as this seems more in tune with the natural world.' Similarly, B6900a (no information) 'like[s] to get things done' but also tries to take a moment each day 'to hear, to see, to notice the world and the environment and nature'. For Lefebvre, if the rational and industrial tendencies of capitalism fragment time and attempt to dominate everyday life, cyclic time lives on in the biological and the social (2014: 341–2), comprising rhythms that are 'present from molecules to galaxies, passing through the beatings of the heart, the blinking of the eyelids and breathing, the alternation of days and nights, months and seasons and so on' (Lefebvre and Régulier, 2004[1985]: 76). The conditions of the pandemic have led to new temporal horizons and relations for the writers and new attunements to the natural world.

The seasons now 'have more significance than dates on a calendar' (B7306a; see also Davidson and Park, 2020) for many writers. W2322a (Male, 76, Hampshire, Retired

Teacher) reflects on how the ‘annual rhythms of nature became stronger for us’, as he and his partner were able to notice and connect to changes on their walk ‘which plants were in flower; birds nesting, migrants coming and going, the gathering of rooks for tree-top conferences, which ends in early spring; the position of the sun at dawn, and the height to which it rises by the summer solstice’. However, he contrasts these rhythms, which ‘were clearer to detect, and feel part of’, with ‘the artificial rhythm of lockdown’ and the subsequent fragmentation of the time of shopping, waiting, planning, and isolating as they assumed a new importance in the everyday. There was a tension between the dominance of everyday linear time, whether blurred or full of disjointed activity, and the possibility of connecting to rhythms of the natural world. On a drive out, W6667a remembers noticing that ‘autumn was arriving and somehow we seemed to have missed spring and summer’.

For those with access to a garden, an appreciation of the seasons and small changes in plants and trees was more readily within reach. ‘I have always enjoyed watching my garden change with the seasons’, writes D826a (Female, 70, Widow, Bristol, Retired Social Worker). ‘I have relished the changes in the trees and gardens which I pass [when out walking]. It has been a great consolation.’ M6815a writes of noticing, when out in nearby green spaces, ‘that the blackberries seem to have come particularly early this year’. She grew vegetables for the first time and found it ‘really interesting to see how slowly they go at first and then how quickly the beans grew and ripened. We are still waiting for our tomatoes but they are finally starting to colour up.’ For some correspondents already interested in gardening, used to doing ‘major seasonal things, like hedge-cutting, and occasionally plant[ing] up containers or buy[ing] a new shrub’, the experience of the pandemic and closer connection to the rhythms of the garden meant ‘I am timing things better in the garden than I usually do’, instead of being late to plant beans or forgetting to buy seed potatoes (M7145a, Female, 64, Widow, Plymouth, Retired Administrator). For others, the power of nature was suddenly present: ‘It was amazing how quickly nature took over’, writes P7552ab, reflecting that ‘if human kind died out, everything would be covered in greenery and decay in a blink’.

Attunement to the natural world exceeded the immediate environment. D7076ab articulates this powerfully: ‘We woke up in a world emptied of everything but natural noise.’ Although he had a sense of being ‘shut into our village’, this presence of the natural world beyond was quite literally heard. Others spent more time ‘sitting in the garden enjoying the peace and quiet’ (D4736a, Male, 54, Married, Hampshire, Air Traffic Control Assistant). This led to becoming ‘more aware of the weather’, as well as the growth of flowers and trees. An enhanced consciousness of ‘lunar cycles, and changes in the weather’ (E5559a, Male, 53 Single, Devon, Retail) included those who ‘loved looking at the moon over the sea’ or ‘just watching the sea at close quarters’ (P7552ab). For A2a, ‘looking out of my bedroom window at night I was surprised and amazed at the beauty of a turquoise sky’. This chimes with Lefebvre’s lines ‘Overlooking the gardens, the differences between habitual rhythms blur; they seem to disappear into a structural immobility.’ He reminds the reader that there is ‘nothing inert in the *world*’, just ‘the apparent immobility [of the garden] that contains one thousand and one movements’ (2004[1992]: 17; emphasis in original). For him, the release of rhythms ‘demands attention and a certain time’ (ibid.: 32), something the pandemic has perhaps generated.

Conclusions: A rhythmanalysis of the everyday life of COVID-19

This article has unravelled the spatio-temporal relationships that have come into view during the COVID-19 pandemic. We have used rhythmanalysis to grasp rhythms as ruptured, changed, and remade, and have highlighted rhythm as a crucial if often overlooked or taken-for-granted aspect of the everyday. Our analysis of changes to everyday life during the pandemic shows how social life was always-already shaped by arrangements in time and space and constellations of rhythms comprising everyday activities, practices, relations, and technologies. The initial shock at the UK-wide lockdown in March 2020 was felt as disruption and confinement, resulting in arrhythmia as a dissonance in and detachment from the ongoingness of everyday life. We have attended to how this arrhythmia was experienced as time became blurred or merged, a spatio-temporal differentiation inducing both pleasure and despair. And we have explored the creation of new rhythms in relation to practices and devices that mark time and an attunement to nature. This work demonstrates that rhythm animates writers' reflections on their experiences of the pandemic, that rhythm is both produced by and produces the everyday, and that it offers analytical purchase for a sociological reading of the uneven space–times of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The article is also a rhythmanalytic composition. It has tuned into different voices and folded them together in a deliberately dense assemblage with an affective force, amplifying shared experiences and highlighting differences. Attention to differences in the textures of pandemic space–time is crucial to grasping and understanding the nuances of everyday life and countering the totalising tendencies of theories or public narratives that characterise time in singular terms, such as through acceleration or slowness. Working with rhythm as both an object and a tool of analysis, we have been able to identify particular rhythms and the ways in which they are entangled with one another in differentiated polyrhythmic constellations. This article further shows how working from the 'mundane' (Holmes and Hall, 2020) sheds light on a global event that reverberates across the social rhythms (Zerubavel, 1981) of institutions and collective practices to reconfigure the everyday.

We argue that attending to rhythm in this way allows us to tease out distinctive rhythmic relations arising from the pandemic that have both broader theoretical and empirical salience. Rather than everyday life being colonised by what Lefebvre (2004) sees as the relentless activity of work (and 'leisure') in advanced capitalism, inactivity gives rise to a lack of rhythm. And instead of the intensification of time arising from heightened activity, the lack of differentiation of the present is experienced as endless, giving a new inflexion to Helga Nowotny's (1994) concept of an 'extended present'. There are hints of the transformative potential of new rhythms along with significant inequalities (Reid-Musson, 2018). Through the abrupt and wide-scale alterations in rhythm induced by the pandemic, some MO writers found they were able to make and participate in new rhythms they enjoyed, including attaching to nature and having more time in their day. Others, however, experienced rhythms that required new ways of synchronising time and space that left them with less time. Our rhythmanalysis of these MO responses, then, raises questions of how power relations are made and remade in and through continuities and changes in everyday rhythms, and how new rhythms might be deliberately cultivated outside a global pandemic; issues that are ripe for further development in future work on MO and rhythm. Overall, this work expands our sociocultural understanding and public record via MO of the COVID-19 pandemic in the present and for the future and

contributes to the 'emerging field' of 'rhythm studies' (Crespi and Manghani, 2020: 4), as well as the sociologies of rhythm/rhythmanalysis, time, and everyday life.

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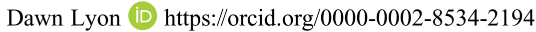
Dawn Lyon  https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8534-2194

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1. The directive was prepared collectively by colleagues engaged on our broader project, 'A Day at a Time' (https://research.kent.ac.uk/daat-coronavirus/), including Simon Bailey, Michelle Bastian, Rebecca Coleman, Emily Grabham, Dawn Lyon, and Dean Pierides. It was supported by a Leverhulme Research Fellowship (Coleman, 'Mediating Presents: Producing "the Now" in Contemporary Digital Culture', RF-2017-632\8) and the Edinburgh College of Art at the University of Edinburgh (Bastian). Analysis has been made possible by a British Academy Small Grant for a project led by Rebecca Coleman and Dawn Lyon in collaboration with Corine van Emmerik and Chloe Turner ('Feeling, Making and Imagining Time: Everyday Temporal Experiences in the Covid-19 Pandemic', SRG2021\211073). Details of all Mass Observation directives can be found at 'Mass Observation Project Directives' (n.d.). The full 'COVID-19 and Time' directive can be found in 'Summer Directive 2020' (2020).
2. MO are currently revising the information that they ask panellists to provide.
3. MO have a protocol for responses that suggest the writers are at risk; van Emmerik (2022) has explored one such case in a separate article.

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