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From Stranger to Neighbor: Field Entry in the Time of Death and COVID in the Hi-Lo Country of New Mexico*

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"I'll leave the key for you on the bed." Ellie said.

Besides running the only motel in her village, Ellie is the village clerk in this very small New Mexican town. Ellie told me she was preparing for the monthly village council meeting that night. I said I'd like to attend, as I'd just bought a lot in the neighboring village twelve miles away, and it might be a good way to meet people. I told her that I hoped to start some research on changes in the cattle ranching business in New Mexico's Hi-Lo country. (Packer concentration, climate change, and shifting urban market demand are making that already precarious business, or lifeway, even more precarious). I also told Ellie that I had family errands to run, as my mother, who lived two hours away, was dying of cancer. Ellie offered her condolences, and said I'd be welcome to come to the meeting. But she warned me "To keep my ears open."

I wondered what she meant. I said something about how interesting town meetings surely can be. I had offered to make up the room myself, if she'd leave me some clean sheets. She said that wouldn't be necessary. She'd find time to make up the room and would leave the door unlocked for me. That's what she did.

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Ellie's motel and the village meeting hall across the street are among the few occupied commercial buildings in town. There are only a few other businesses: a restaurant and filling station down the road, another gas station next to the motel, a propane vendor, and a State Highway maintenance shop. Aside from the combined elementary and high school building, these are the only non-mobile signs of commerce in the village. Most commercial activity flies over or passes through, except for the locomotives that growl for hours on the siding beside the motel, waiting their turn to climb a nearby mountain pass on their way to the coalfields of Wyoming.

After finding the motel room open as promised, I crossed the highway and joined the meeting. Ellie sat at a side table with the village council's secretary, council members at foldable tables arranged at the head of the room. Visitors, seven of us counting myself, sat on folding chairs facing the council tables. Fluorescent lights hummed. There were five council members present, just enough for a quorum. The mayor greeted the visitors and mentioned that he remembered meeting me a few weeks before, when he had been watching a crew drill new water well for a family member's house. A school teacher, sitting next to me with her husband and son, coughed and sneezed a bit after we introduced ourselves.

"Uh oh," I remember saying to her.

I double checked my mask for fit.

"I know." She said, "I should probably put my mask on, but it's allergies, not COVID." She moved her mask from her chin, where it had been, to cover her mouth and nose.

There were brief reports about emergency services, the volunteer fire department, and a discussion about the senior center manager's request for a raise. Then, I came to understand why I had been told to keep my ears open.

The mayor pulled a letter from his pocket, said he'd been advised to read his resignation aloud and leave the council meeting right afterwards. The letter noted his efforts to maintain the town's water tank (which involved climbing a ladder and exerting himself in ways that his doctor had said he should not be doing). He detailed his efforts to keep the Senior Center going, and to keep up with village paperwork required by the State, but it had all been too much, and he was resigning effective immediately.

That caused a low murmur by council members and visitors alike. As the mayor started to make an exit, the village secretary and Ellie stood up to block his way, holding up papers that needed to be signed while he was still mayor. The mayor put pen to a few papers, then made for the door. Without the mayor, there was no longer a quorum. All agreed that

things were a mess.

Having had an earful of local politics, as Ellie had predicted, I was ready for a night's rest, and returned to my room across the street.

Two days later, having started work with my sister to find a room in an elder care facility for our ailing mother, my phone rang. It was Ellie.

Ellie asked about my mom, and said, "I have some bad news."

"Someone in that meeting came up positive for COVID. I'm calling everyone who was at that meeting."

"I hope it wasn't the woman I was sitting next to. . ."

"It was. So we're all getting tested," Ellie said.

I said I'd do the same. The elder care home would be unlikely to accept mom as a resident if I was positive for COVID, so I checked the CDC website, found that if I was vaccinated (I was, and boosted), and if I had no symptoms, I need not do anything. But I got a rapid test from a drugstore and tested the next day. Negative. Two days later, I tested again and again I was negative. The elder care home was satisfied, and mother was admitted.

So I called Ellie. She said she had tested negative too and that everyone was fine. But that didn't last.

About a month later, I called Ellie to arrange a reservation for a student who would be in the area for some preliminary ethnographic work.

Ellie answered right away (her mobile phone is her work phone; I could hear other people talking, and guessed that she was in the clerk's office across the street from her motel). I said I'd need a room, and asked how things had been going. Ellie asked about my mom; I said she was in the elder care home, and happy to be there.

"Wait a sec," she said. "Let me put you on speaker."

"Hey, you remember that guest at our meeting? He needs a hotel room. See, I did come down with COVID and so did a couple other people here. Tell them how you are. . ."

I said I'd tested negative and still was, and was hoping everyone was alright. I heard two or three voices say yes, that's good. They remembered who I was.

Some of the ease of field entry (within a week I figured I'd met roughly 15 percent of the people who live within 25 miles of this village) was facilitated by my having a reason to be in the community—I needed to meet people since I'd bought a small lot in a neighboring village. I also had another reason to be in the country: arranging hospice care for my mother's coming death. People in the community always offered

condolences and noted how they'd dealt with death in their own families. And COVID, too, provided a discursive opening that connected me to the people in the Hi-Lo country. We were connected by the virus, members in a circle of exposure or infection, circles of caring and caretaking. COVID, in particular, provided a reason for folks to call me rather than me having to reach out to the folks in the village.

Subsequent visits with people from that meeting always included questions about my mom, and commentary on the virus, on what this or that doctor had said, on this or that community member "who'd had it bad," or (more than once) about how the media was making things worse than it was.

In a distanced, social science way of speaking or writing, what was going on here was the work of building field relationships and finding locally meaningful roles through which to learn about a community. In my view, it is long past time to bridge the epistemological gap between being what Agar called a professional stranger to becoming a neighbor within the communities in which ethnographers, even business ethnographers, live and work. COVID can be deadly, and has created political division. But COVID can also provide openings—viral connections for newcomers—through expressions of shared precarity and our shared, transitory lives. COVID, and death, may provide discursive frames for expressions of care, easing the transition from stranger, to neighbor.

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*Names and locations are masked in this account.