

In Praise of Quarantine Clapping

The highlight of my day — every day — is opening my window and yelling at the sky.



Credit...Cari Vander Yacht

By Amanda Hess (New York Times)

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Every night at 7, my Brooklyn neighborhood comes to life with the calculated whimsy of a cuckoo clock. It starts with a single neighbor clapping. Soon dozens more join in, throwing open their front doors or hanging from their windows to put their hands together and say “wooooo.” Perhaps 20 seconds into the proceedings, a man emerges from the garden apartment across from me, banging a pot with a spoon, and a woman appears on the stoop of the house next door, her spaniel barking helpfully at her side. Often there is a special guest: On a recent evening, a guy motored by on a delivery bike, a whistle blaring from between his lips. It’s all over within five minutes.

The Clapping first spread through New York City on a Friday night in late March. Following similar gestures in [Italy](#), [India](#) and [Spain](#), the New York iteration was [seeded by a strategic marketing firm](#) and circulated over social media to thank workers on the front lines of the coronavirus outbreak. It was originally presented as a one-off event,

and after that, residents were asked to repeat it once a week. But now we do it every single night.

The Clapping has surely been heard by doctors and nurses and E.M.T.s, by UPS workers and Instacart delivery people and the many other New Yorkers who are putting themselves at risk to protect their city. I live just a couple of blocks from [the choked I.C.U.](#) of the Brooklyn Hospital Center, and on Tuesday, [firefighters lined up](#) right outside the center to cheer the staff on.

But the more the ritual is repeated, the more it feels as if it's for the rest of us, too. We used to go out to concerts or movies or plays and clap for the performances. Now the clapping is the performance. It is our regularly scheduled programming, live and in person when basically nothing else is.

Thanking health care workers may be the point of this act, but its delights lie beside the point. The Clapping is a communal outburst. It is a reminder that though we are isolated, we are not alone. It is made up of a hundred little improvisations that nevertheless add up to a comfortingly predictable cacophony, tailored to the street where you live.

In some neighborhoods, the Clapping manifests as a sparse pattering, and in others it echoes between high-rise apartment complexes, producing walls of sound. On a recent night in Stuyvesant Town, the Clapping was punctuated by clanging bells and hoots from horn instruments; on the Lower East Side, [somebody blasted out Sinatra](#) singing "New York, New York." I'm told that some blocks do not clap at all.

It's a cliché to describe a performance as "life-affirming," but here the description feels true. I like it for smaller reasons, though. Like many New Yorkers, I don't know most of my neighbors, and I've found myself using these few minutes every night to gather clues to their domestic lives. I notice who emerges from sprawling multistory brownstones and who from apartment buildings. One night the man with the pot was joined by a companion banging her own kitchenware. Another time, the spaniel failed to appear, and I reveled in my exaggerated disappointment. Did the dog have a previous engagement?

There are those who choose to abstain from the Clapping, and those who actively campaign against it. The British right-wing commentator Katie Hopkins, who is whiling away her quarantine standing in front of a poster of the American flag and ranting into her webcam, has [criticized the applause in England](#) as a foolish hobby. She called it "clapping at the sky," which is an accidentally lovely way of putting it. Others argue that the Clapping is an empty gesture, accomplishing nothing for the workers who are most at risk. And yet even for the critics the Clapping is a kind of gift; it gives them a performance to pan.

It's true that on the internet, the ritual can appear flattened into a self-satisfied show. On Twitter, I watched the queasy corporate spectacle of [the Salesforce Tower in San Francisco](#) light up with a video of clapping hands. The hashtag #ClapBecauseWeCare

distorts the experience to fit the contours of a social media awareness campaign; it oversells the purpose of the event and makes it all feel a little smug. As social distancing has migrated all of our human interactions online, the Clapping has revealed the limits of the medium. Experiences let loose on the internet risk being swiftly mined for their utility to the platform, reduced to mere carriers of information capable of accumulating commentary and debate.

I can understand why people feel compelled to share videos of the Clapping, as it is perhaps the most thrilling non-horrifying event that a quarantined New Yorker can document on any given day. But watching the Clapping in other neighborhoods feels pointlessly remote, like eavesdropping on a conversation in a language you don't understand. You kind of have to be there — and you only get to be there if you're already there.

Clappers may have learned of the ritual through a Facebook post or a message chalked on the pavement of a neighborhood park. But it persists because we hear it, and we want to keep hearing it. Some days it is the only thing I hear from outside that is not an ambulance siren.

Every night as the Clapping hour approaches, my body is alert with anxious anticipation. Will we clap again tonight? So far, the answer has been yes. With each day, it feels more likely that we will stop only once the virus does. Until then, I've got nowhere else to be.

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