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Surviving the pandemic

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edited by Annalisa Oboe and Gaia Giuliani

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Surviving the pandemic

Reflections on intimacy, care, inequalities, resistance and transnational solidarity

edited by Annalisa Oboe and Gaia Giuliani¹

The aim of *Surviving the pandemic* is to address the urgent need to understand, from a variety of perspectives and critical angles, the social and cultural effects of what ‘we’ are going through locally and globally, because of an unprecedented pandemic that is changing the life of many.

In order to contribute to the current debate on Covid-19, *From the European South* elicited articles, creative pieces, and ongoing personal reflections that could offer interdisciplinary, multifaceted analyses and representations of the global crisis, asking how culture, the arts, society and politics are changing in this major shift, and how we are facing the fragility of the human. Issue 7 also begins to figure out what our lives will be like after the lockdowns in most parts of the world, and how we resist the inequalities that this pandemic is revealing and taking to their extreme. Can we imagine new paradigms for new beginnings?

The collected contributions reflect on the ‘we’ that is investigated. Coherently with a postcolonial approach, this special focus highlights the existence of many different ‘wes’, according to a politics of location and an attention to the uneven distribution of power across the globe, which acknowledge the working of disparities in the way the pandemic is experienced. If this pandemic has a global scope, its effects are not universally the same: if it is changing the life of those who were considered as untouched or untouchable – because of their geographical location and their racial, class and gender privileges – it is making its impact on common people all the more striking. As the collected articles show, the effects of the pandemic need to be investigated at the crossroads of race, gender, sexuality, class, age and health differences and divides. The lockdowns have had a very unequal impact on people according to their housing, work, and social conditions, and affected them personally and intimately very unevenly, within and across national borders. The pandemic and institutional responses to it increased the violent effects of gendered and racialised power relations and border regimes, leaving behind increasingly impoverished national and transnational social margins and people at-the-border. They gave way to border restrictions and ideas of the nation as an imagined community that-must-be-defended. In response to it, many forms of resistance and solidarity based on medical aid and care emerged locally and transnationally.

Surviving the pandemic opens with a visual art essay by Gaia Giuliani in collaboration with performer Paolo Gorgoni and photographer Fidelia Avanzato. In their “Pandemic: a six-handed study,” they venture on a journey into some of their ‘pandemic emotions’ through photography, and propose a political project for the time to come. In view of a future that will presumably re-experience global contagion, we need to promote care, self-care, responsibility and proximity as ethical and political principles structuring individual and collective life. In her “Feminist Intersectional Perspectives on Pandemic Narratives: Larissa Lai’s *The Tiger Flu*,” Chiara Xausa also reflects on the gendered nature of the current Coronavirus emergency, while imagining a new beginning that counteracts patriarchy, environmental change and capitalism’s consumptive force from the viewpoint of queer voices of colour from marginalized communities.

In “Israel/Palestine/Covid19: one more weapon in the siege?” Patrick Williams moves the focus to the specific historical and political scenario of Palestine, and analyses Israel’s behaviour in relation to Covid-19 and Gaza. Having closed off the access points to the Strip, Israel has ensured that no medicine or medical equipment can get in to prop up the shattered Palestinian healthcare system. At the same time, in the author’s view, closing the borders turns the pandemic into a potentially lethal form of coercion, the latest experiment, the newest weapon in the apparently never-ending siege. Melissa Tandiwe Myambo’s “schematic notes” also focus on borders, which she deems ‘unnatural’, and provides a first analysis of the central role that spatio-temporal border closures have played in the world since the emergence of Covid-19. Her question “Will Covid-19 break time and space?” warns against the dangers of narrating this crisis as a temporal break between a before and after. And as for closing off regional, national or continental spaces, Myambo forcefully argues that a global pandemic necessitates a global response. Layla Brown-Vincent’s “The Pandemic of Racial Capitalism: another world is possible” uses the Covid-19 pandemic to expose the deadly “anti-Blackness” attitude at work globally. She provocatively argues, by looking at the neoliberal socio-economic logics undergirding technologies of the disposability of life at play in the handling of Covid-19, that what the present crisis evidences is “racial Capitalism” as “the true pandemic”. Brown suggests, by exploring Cuban and Venezuelan medical systems’ international solidarity, that another world is indeed possible, if we can learn from the current crisis.

In the closing article of this special focus on Covid-19, Claudia Gualtieri appropriately offers a route through some of the most significant cultural and theoretical interventions that the global intellectual community has produced since the outbreak of the pandemic. “Keywords, again: provisional reflections from a situated perspective”, in line with a cultural studies analytical paradigm, observes the Covid-19 conversation through the lens of selected keywords as a constellation of relations that, from a situated perspective, provide indications of current drives of change and of future challenges that have emerged during the spread of the Coronavirus pandemic.

Annalisa Oboe and Gaia Giuliani

Note

¹ In the case of Gaia Giuliani, this special issue is an outcome of the project “(De)Othering: Deconstructing Risk and Otherness: hegemonic scripts and counter-narratives on migrants/refugees and ‘internal Others’ in Portuguese and European mediascapes” (Reference: POCI-01-0145- FEDER-029997), funded by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology FCT (DL57/2016/CP1341/CT0025 and CES-SOC/UID/50012/2019) and by FEDER, the European Regional Development Fund, through the COMPETE 2020 Operational Programme for Competitiveness and Internationalization (POCI), and by other Portuguese institutions through the FCT.

Pandemic: a six-handed study

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Activist and Performer

Fidelia Avanzato

Photographer

ABSTRACT

The present six-handed study is a journey into some of our pandemic emotions through photography. It is the result of a collective investigation and some improvisation in a Lisbon interior. The subject of this collective research is the impact of the pandemic on affects and the body. Body and affects are seen here as concepts and emotions deeply affected by the social and planetary transformations generated by the long-lasting and deadly acceleration of something called neoliberal capitalism, of which the ongoing pandemic is only one of the latest outcomes, together with the uncertainties and further vulnerabilities generated by the omen of a recurrent viral catastrophe. This is the frame within which the three authors of the study gave shape to their investigation, being among those who live in Europe as fully-fledged citizens and having relatively benefited till now from the distance the Global North has established from social and environmental disasters 'out there'. The voice that accompanies the present photographic story is situated, individual, and collective at the same time: it represents a viewpoint, an emotional tangle that reflects the lonely experience of one of us who is also and immediately in relationship with the others, and in the absence of the Other. This point of view is provided here in a circular time lapse, as the pandemic overflows the boundaries between past, present, and future, it brings memory in the realm of dreams and filters emotions through fears of the End and loneliness.

Keywords

pandemic, body, affects, silence, absence, fear of the end

Introduction

A journey into pandemic emotions through photography. Fears, desires, presences, and absences are at the centre of this six-handed study, born out of reflections and improvisations in a Lisbon interior. It came to life from the necessity to explore the present time, suspended and solid, and to imagine future time, absent and unpredictable, starting from a dialogue between bodies, affects, and silences. Body and affects refer to concepts and emotions that have been profoundly deconstructed by the current pandemic, which we consider to be the result of the acceleration of neoliberalism which is the context that allowed for the creation of biopolitical devices that further transform, probably in a definitive manner, perceptions of the

body as well as forms of affective organization between those who, by living in the Global North and being citizens with full rights, had benefitted up until this time, albeit in varying capacities, from a sort of distance from social and environmental disasters, a distance that the so-called North of the world seems to enjoy. Control, containment, isolation, atomization, and at the same time the valuing of affects and care work through cultural, social, and patriarchal economical devices (Busi 2020), the deconstruction of the modern relation between work and lifetime by the precariousness and active ideology of competition are all results, at the social, cultural, and economic level, of the intersection of all neoliberal politics (Giuliani, Martucci, and Galetto 2014). They now combine with, at the conjunction of neoliberalism and anti-Covid measures, rhetoric that is pro-family, hetero-sexist, and moralist ('stay at home', 'family is the safest place') on one hand and with the individualization of the securitarian system on the other. People are encouraged to involve themselves in the policing and disciplining of neighbours, passers-by, and strangers until they accuse and violently attack others by the reiteration of securitarian discourse that instigates moral panic against the 'spreaders'. The body and its movements are always more and more policed and valued by the big data industry, data that is made available to large international companies by the security apparatus of nation states. Contrarily, in the domestic space the contradiction is intensified between, on one hand, the feeling of solitude derived from the precariousness of the job market and its resulting solitary and selfish competition (marked by the drastic reduction of union protections) and, on the other hand, the reproductive imperatives founded on hierarchies of gender, hetero-patriarchal family models, and the idea of a nation (and of a Europe) that is white and is a property to 'defend' (one need only think of the absence of protections for undocumented migrants, for refugees in welcome centres, for the most marginalized, impoverished, and racialized populations to whom the state does not guarantee neither a residence permit, nor housing, social support, or strategies for personal protection). Our relationship with all of this is necessarily ambivalent: immersed in neoliberal dynamics and in a "risk society" (Beck 1992), defined by social and environmental disasters that are the results of the logic of exploitation and of extractivism and (geo)ontologies of the Anthropocene, which are precarious in regards to work and affects in their neoliberal acceleration (Povinelli 2016), we are critical in the regard of heteronormativity and pro-family imperatives, which then come to affect the private sphere. For this reason, we have created forms of communities that resist and mutually support each other, founded on the idea that 'care of oneself=care of others'; communities that are not closed nor closed-off by the fear of invasion (i.e. anti-migrant rhetoric) or by moral panic towards others ("you are limited to your family members and significant others," according to the Decree-Law announced on 4 May 2020).

We act in line with what Sara Ahmed (25 August 2014), recalling Audre Lorde (1988), believes to be the "care of oneself": a subversive act that is not a "power technology" (Foucault 1976) but an act of war because "in directing our care towards ourselves we are redirecting

care away from its proper objects” (Ahmed 2014), or rather towards those who the hetero-patriarchal system defines as ‘objects of care’ (children, husbands, seniors) for feminized subjects. This subversive act is such only because it is interdependent from the care of others:

in queer, feminist and anti-racist work self-care is about the creation of community, fragile communities, assembled out of the experiences of being shattered. We reassemble ourselves through the ordinary, everyday and often painstaking work of looking after ourselves; looking after each other. This is why when we have to insist, I matter, we matter, we are transforming what matters. (Ahmed 2014)

Finally, we are critical in regard to the normalization of the ‘healthy and sanitized body’, as much performative and ‘able’ as it is ascetic, permeabilized against the ‘contact-contagion’, not because we believe that it is not important to preserve ourselves and others, and especially the most vulnerable, from sicknesses; but because we believe that the deconstructive criticism of social and bodily norms of ‘social distancing’ (a very significant expression given the abovementioned context) allows for us to take an individual and collective political stand against authoritative disciplinary forms sold to us as necessary and against the elaboration of care practices founded on responsibility. This criticism is not in conflict, but rather goes hand in hand with the awareness that the deconstruction of the national healthcare system and the absence of a global healthcare system are the result of a selective logic – once again, neoliberal – that privileges the wellness and the health of both those who can pay for it and of the part of society that must be defended for a whole series of reasons defined by specific standards of age, gender, health, race, and sexuality.

Our objective was to force ourselves to perform some of the emotions that have sprung from “control,” “isolation,” and “social distancing” – constriction, solitude, fear, distance, absence, and deficiency are some of these emotions – in this way attempting to unravel them. The voice that accompanies the photos is a situated, single, and at the same time collective voice: it represents a point of view, a tangle of emotions that reflects the solitary lived experience of one of us who is also immediately *in relation* to the rest of us, and in absence of *the other*. Their tangle of emotions is represented here in a circular manner because the pandemic invades both spaces of the present and future as well as spaces of memory, reassembling sensations and absences that today are filtered by the fear of the end and by solitude: we are unable to know if the first moment of reflection (fig. 1) is followed by an encounter with *her* – a loved one, a friend, a sister, infected or simply isolated, distant/absent for a short while or forever – (fig. 2, 3, 4, and 5) or if the encounter is just a dream, a memory, or an obsession. In fact, the corporeal interweaving (fig. 6, 7, and 8) that follows is the result of solitary work related to absences and presences, memories, desires, and hopes. The circle is completed by the image of a body that is once again alone (fig. 9).

To be able to unveil these emotions we needed to first render them visible: we therefore used a medium – plastic – that today is truly *caught in the middle*, a cumbersome element that

envelops not only bodies by distancing them from each other, but also one's imagination, sensations, and desires. As if it were the great chronotype of this century, or rather a place and moment through which one can re-visualize the means of individual relationships and reform social relationships, for us plastic assumes the connotation of the means of excellence for psychological and physical alienation from others and it represents the crumbling of that which is *in common*.

The set was organized in an apartment at Rua Rafael de Andrade 19 in Lisbon where Gaia Giuliani and the photographer Ida Fiele (aka Fidelia Avanzato) live. After a long quarantine alone, they prepared the set together with HIV+ activist and performer Paolo Gorgoni, who was also emerging from a long self-isolation. The scene and selection of materials were the result of a close dialogue between the three, based on years of artistic and intellectual collaboration and on a strong friendship. The set was fruit of improvisation, starting with a shared storyboard structured in indoor scenes that depicted sensations and moods, as well as actual bodily conditions. The inside of a house/prison in the time of Covid-19 is thematized here as a place/shelter and at the same time a precursory place of dangerous absences that ensnare desires, reduce affects, and cause obsessions to run rampant. It is a place of reflection – for us it was a laboratory for anything and everything, but also and most of all it was a lab of estrangement and solitude, different than the media vulgarity and the biopolitics of containment that described closing oneself in one's home as residing serenely in the most safe and reassuring place. The three authors of this study experienced the domestic space in both ways, thanks to the strong network of emotional support and the absence of toxic relationships. The communities that they are part of – Gorgoni's friends and roommates on one hand, and the family composed of Avanzato, Giuliani, and their cat Ugo on the other – allowed the collective elaboration of these emotions and states of consciousness to give life to this present work.

Upon deciding to work together we assumed the risk of infection. Even though it was low or null, we decided that it was worth the risk in order to give a sense of collectivity to our experience. Assuming this risk also meant that we had to assume a sense of responsibility towards others, and therefore we had to practice safety measures in regard to other people with whom we came into contact in the days following our encounter, allowing them to protect themselves by practicing physical distancing from us.

The selection of plastic as *the means* by which we looked at our bodies, at present and absent affects, and at silences hinges on the fact that it has entered our personal and collective lived experiences in a massive way: masks, gloves, uniforms, goggles, visors, etc. are the devices to which utmost importance is ascribed on a global scale as an immediate (and long-lasting) mass containment measure; devices which contribute to create estrangement and absence. The faces of neighbours, lovers, and relatives are now counterfeit, whereas, regarding touch, our hands do not encounter the warmth of other hands. On the other hand, only for some people was plastic not already a part – even if not in a widespread way – of daily life, be

it relational or sexual plastic. For us, in regard to the personal and collective history of those who developed this study, plastic had already been, for a long time, a method of preservation, containment, and physical and social distancing, since it is related to the prevention of HIV. Plastic has been engraved with the moral stigma of promiscuity which today, in the era of Covid-19, risks becoming a 'moral stigma of proximity'. We are referring to the 'moral stigma of proximity' as the stigma generated during lockdown in regard to those who have 'antisocial' behaviours (who are therefore seen as vectors of contagion): one need only think of the physical proximity of strangers during large gatherings, not to mention the sexual proximity with strangers (where the other *is outside* of the domestic space) for which the stigma is not generated in reference to the exchange of bodily fluids, but rather by the mere presence of the other. If sexuality, beginning with the outbreak of HIV, was profoundly stigmatized, and particularly sexuality that was non hetero-direct (especially that of men who have sex with men) and that which was related to the exchange of sex/money, today sexuality is stigmatized as antisocial when it happens outside of the familial context and of so-called "family members including significant others" (defined as "stable affects" by the Decree-Law of May 14th, 2020). While condoms covered the obscene object of contagion during anti-AIDS discourse, today, masks and gloves are worn as on par with clothing, to preserve nudity which, up until a few months ago, was not considered as such. The ideological value and the semiotic capacity of the 'stigma of proximity' clearly emerge when one thinks of those who, during the lockdown, were forced to work in unprotected places: forced proximity in places of work (factories, farms, logistic offices in the North and fields in the South) was silently legitimated and juxtaposed to the more free, political, and subversive proximity (think of the sinister equivalence between the ban of gatherings and the ban of protests) that was also outside the realm of 'stable' – disciplined, controlled, and controllable – relationships.

The plastic that wraps around hands and faces, or whole bodies, is today considered by everyone to be a tool of social levelling: it responds to an epidemic that is potentially able to affect anyone who wears this uniform which hides class elements. In reality, plastic is the symbol of social inequalities and of the differentiated access to personal and collective health and safety: it is renowned in the history of contamination from nuclear waste and of epidemics that have caused and are causing victims outside of Europe and the West, precariousness and vulnerability (Butler 2004; 2009), it marks the boundary between who can protect themselves and who cannot (Giuliani 2020b), who has the right to breathe and who doesn't (Mbembe 2020). In our case, plastic marks the safe space in which we find ourselves, being, the authors of this study, people who, contrarily to many others, have white skin, European citizenship, a roof over their heads, and income and/or financial support. This – even if in vastly differing capacities determined by chronic illnesses and various pathologies – renders us privileged in regard to many forms of misery and vulnerability, not solely related to the virus.

Starting from this specific "politics of location" (Rich 1987), which describes us and does

not absolve us, and from the awareness of our own “white fragility” (DiAngelo 2018) at the face of the enormity of the effects of Anthropocene violence, such as the Covid-19 epidemic, outside of the borders and at the margins of the West, in our visual reflection plastic helped unveil our polysemic relationship with physical, social, and imaginative barriers. Plastic was, in addition to a garment, “habitus” that ensnares social conduct; in addition to external frill, internalized norm that disciplines affective relationships; in addition to a real containment and isolation device, the fruit of imagination that reveals how the idea of oneself and of others is already enveloped by synthetic impermeable fabrics.

We used two kinds of plastic: one that wraps up our bodies and contains them (the kind of transparent plastic wrap used to preserve food) and one that separates physical spaces (light, translucent plastic sheets that are used to protect furniture). Both impede what Sara Ahmed defined as “skin-to-skin intimacy” (2000), or rather the sometimes-silent proximity that permits communication between individuals and between individuals and other living beings. They impede one from sensing the “trans-corporeal interdependence” between beings, and in particular between human beings, to use the expression coined by Stacey Alaimo (2008; 2010; 2018), and the “intra-activity interdependence” that the feminist physicist Karen Barad (2007; 2008) considers to pre-exist actions and choices and is the terrain onto which individual subjectivity is born. A subjectivity that is nourished by exchanges, by affective connections, by forms of dependency without which it would not exist.

In the permanence of “moral panic” (Giuliani 2020b), which is the product of, and which itself reproduces, atomization, isolation, and estrangement, plastic becomes the manifestation of the fear of both the infected *other* and *their* incontrovertible absence. It is this tension between attraction and repulsion that guides our photographic journey. And with it, the fear that the memory of contact is forever jeopardized by having plastic *in between*, or rather the fear that such a jeopardy will prevent us from imagining new “strange encounters” (Ahmed 2000) in the future, made of flesh, mouths, skin, liquids, and heat inside and outside of the domestic space, inside and throughout closed communities as mandated by the biopolitics of containment. Among us, there is in fact the fear that, by confining the body into its boundaries, the plastic *inside of us* will obstruct the fantasy of new intersections and that it will conceal, distance, and conform the body forever, rendering ourselves and other people present and absent at the same time. Finally, there is the fear that moral panic will make the loss of people – especially of people who don’t know each other – something less valuable, insignificant, worthless – immaterial numeric data, indifferent, plasticized.

On the other hand, even though fear was at the centre of our reflections, what especially connected our work was that idea that only together – breaking *together* the lines of separation and distances and resisting in different ways the disciplining and segregating dystopias founded on the fear of the *other* as mandated by the biopolitics of containment – we can design something different, different than this, but also different from what was here before (Giuliani 2020a).

Pandemic: A Six-Handed Study



Fig. 1. What lies beyond the eyes: a night swallows the next, in weeks that last a day, in hours that last months. Spit what I can't keep within, in soft swirls. Stay inside, drown there.



Fig. 2. I imprinted the shapes of your body on a veil so that I can touch them when nobody sees me. Suspended in memory while still alive, you are a Shroud on screen, AD 2020.



Fig. 3. Heat passes through surfaces. Our curtain will be thin, so that every spark becomes a warm halo with your features. And so that you can caress me before your arms grow cold.



Fig. 4. Will it be elastic enough, resistant enough, aseptic enough, safe enough? At most, it'll guide us through crossings we've been unaware of.



Fig. 5. Let's get back into the Russian doll: in the beginning there was the plastic-wrapped candy, then came the blowjob with a condom, then, finally, we decided that skin itself was just too dangerous. How many layers are left between the inside and the outside?



Fig. 6. No place is harder to reach than here, now. In fact, we haven't even set foot there yet.



Fig. 7. Thigh or chest? We are under the sheath like skin underneath a layer of hot wax: if you tear it off properly, it only hurts for a second. We will do it slowly, one millimetre at a time, in the most inefficient and painful way.



Fig. 8. They bring us to the table. Together. They will eat us wrapped, without even chopping us up. Not that it matters, since we're not here.



Fig. 9. We are all alone, see?

Note

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Feminist intersectional perspectives on pandemic narratives: Larissa Lai's *The Tiger Flu*

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ABSTRACT

Socially-constructed roles affect women's experiences of and vulnerability to the broad impacts of pandemics. Although women are on the frontline of the Covid-19 response, as health-care workers and caregivers, they have less decision-making power than men in pandemic planning and post-pandemic recovery, and their voices and experiences go unheard. This article considers Larissa Lai's visionary novel, *The Tiger Flu* (2018), as an entry point for conceptualising the gendered nature of the current Coronavirus emergency. A novel about the world to come, after climate change and mass death, *The Tiger Flu* brings women's voices to the forefront of a flu pandemic that has jumped from animals to humans. By creating a world where men are vulnerable and women survive, Lai consciously writes against traditional end-of-world narratives that tend to rely on tiring gender narratives based on the tension between active male heroism and female fragility. Furthermore, *The Tiger Flu* explores the intersectional experiences of a global disease outbreak and imagines a new beginning from the viewpoint of queer voices of colour from marginalised communities. A feminist framework will be employed to shed light on the ongoing possibilities of life in the wake of patriarchy, environmental change and capitalism's consumptive force.

Keywords

gender, Covid-19, pandemic narratives, Larissa Lai, intersectionality

In late March 2020, when announcing that his brother Chris Cuomo had tested positive for Covid-19, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo called the new Coronavirus “the great equalizer” in a tweet. The same expression had been used by Madonna in a controversial bathtub video shared on her Instagram. Since then many others have referred to Covid-19 as the virus that can affect anyone and does not discriminate, and there seems to be a shared consensus that we are all in this together: poor and rich, celebrities and princes, prime ministers and asylum seekers, and men and women.

It most certainly does not discriminate against women, who are less likely to die from Covid-19. Even though globally men and women have been infected in relatively equal numbers, available data suggest that the Coronavirus hits men harder than women.¹ Several biological and behavioural factors could be involved: research has affirmed that women have a stronger immune response to infections, that they also carry two X chromosomes, which contain many immune-related genes, and that the female sex hormone oestrogen is likely to

affect the immune system. Differences in behaviour encompass unhealthy habits that increase the risk of lung diseases, such as smoking (more frequent among men than women) and personal hygiene habits (men are less likely to wash their hands frequently).² At the time of writing, research is still at an early stage, and there is a lack of clear understanding of why women are able to tackle Covid-19 more effectively. Caroline Criado-Perez (2019) asserts that this gender data gap stems from the medical research representation of the male body as the human body, although evidence gathered so far exhibits major differences between men and women as regards disease symptoms, drug therapy and prevention.

Criado-Perez further validates that the reluctance to address gender data gaps in women's health is also due to the "still-persistent attitude that since infectious diseases affect both men and women, it's best to focus on control and treatment" (2019, 298) and to postpone the debate about gender equality to the post-outbreak stage. Arguing that gender is a side issue can have deadly consequences for women: in Sierra Leone, one of the most affected countries by the West African 2014 Ebola outbreak, maternal, neonatal and stillbirth mortality further increased after resources from sexual and reproductive health services were diverted toward the emergency response. Furthermore, women's care-taking responsibilities, such as providing care for sick relatives and preparing the body for a funeral, left them at greater risk of exposure. As Michelle Lokot and Yeva Avakyan suggest, "these 'indirect' consequences of disease outbreaks may be overlooked in the immediate need to provide 'life-saving' health services as part of the response to Covid-19" (2020, 1).

What these indirect crisis-related deaths imply is that biological sex is a major factor determining a person's vulnerability to Covid-19, but socially-constructed roles can also affect women's experiences of and vulnerability to the broad impacts of pandemics. In fact, Coronavirus is not the great equaliser. On the contrary, the current pandemic has laid bare differences and, most importantly, deepened pre-existing inequalities and forms of discrimination. Women make up the majority of health-care workers and caregivers on the frontline of the Covid-19 response. Due to the vertical gender segregation of the health system, they are at greater risk of coming into contact with the virus (see Boniol et al., 2019). School and day-care centre closures have increased women's burden of unpaid care work, the sphere of 'feminised' labour that has long been undervalued and underrecognized by the current neoliberal condition. As Helen Lewis affirms in *The Atlantic*, "across the world, women's independence will be a silent victim of the pandemic" (2020). Among the consequences of quarantine, women's research production has dropped tremendously (Fazackerley 2020). Gender-based violence and abortion restrictions are among other hidden consequences affecting the lives of women and girls. Despite the evidence that Covid-19 has exacerbated gender inequalities, neither a gender lens nor a balance between men and women in political and public decision-making can be observed in most Covid-19 responses across the world. Although women have been praised for 'taking care' of patients, the elderly and sick family members, their voices and

experiences go unheard in the current crisis.

This article considers Larissa Lai's visionary novel *The Tiger Flu* (2018) as an entry point for conceptualising the gendered nature of the current Coronavirus emergency. Diverse approaches to feminist theory are adopted to guide my close reading. An intersectional methodology is used to underscore the dichotomy between female 'innate' vulnerability and nurturing disposition on the one hand, and gender as a social structure causing inequalities on the other hand. As argued by Lokot and Avakyan, "intersectional analysis places power at the centre, analysing not what makes people vulnerable but taking a broader approach to conceptualising how power hierarchies and systemic inequalities shape their life experiences" (2020).

Furthermore, my reading of the novel endeavours to respond to the wartime imagery overused to address the challenges presented by the current Coronavirus: Lai proposes instead a relational narrative that voices a diverse group of people working collectively to restore and repair damaged 'naturalcultural' ecologies.³ My analysis draws on feminist scholars such as Donna Haraway and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, who have powerfully argued that human exceptionalism has pushed us to the edge and determined a global landscape where infectious diseases are becoming increasingly common occurrences. Both provide a framework for understanding human/nonhuman entanglements – including human relationship with bacteria and viruses – and imagine new forms of coexistence that extend care beyond the human world.

Rewriting the end of the world

Lai is a renowned Chinese-Canadian author, best known for *Salt Fish Girl* (2002). In her fictional narratives she explores themes such as gender identity, sexual orientation, racism and cultural diversity, adopting a queer and Chinese diasporic standpoint. Lai's timely and visionary latest novel *The Tiger Flu*, winner of the 2019 Lambda Literary Award for Lesbian Fiction, launches us in a future version of Vancouver ravaged by a pandemic flu that is much more fatal for men: "[t]here are no men in the streets. The men are shut up in houses, covered in lesions and coughing their lungs out" (2018, 13). Set in the Gregorian year 2145 – or Time After Oil (TAO) 127 – after disease and environmental destruction have shattered the world, it is told from the perspective of two young women, Kora and Kirilow. Kora Ko is a working-class teenager from a low-income family living in Saltwater City, an urban centre overrun by patriarchal and corporate technocracy.⁴ Due to the infectious disease, Kora's family experiences extreme socio-economic disadvantage. Thus, when her brother K2 gets flu symptoms, she is sent to the Cordova Dancing Schools for Girls, where she will be taught dances "that fight back" (112) and "forage dances". In other words, the school teaches young women to trade cans "from the time before" (135) stolen from buried supermarkets.

Kirilow Groundsel is a doctor apprentice living in the Grist Village, a place populated by

a community of female clones founded by genetic experiments escaped from the Jemini Group, one of the companies having control over Saltwater City. The Grist sisters are able to reproduce through parthenogenesis. They have “doublers,” who give birth to new sisters, “starfish,” who can regrow their organs and so donate them to the sick Grist sisters who need them, and “grooms” like Kirilow, healers-doctors skilled in surgery and naturopathy: “[w]e split, we slit, we heal, we groom, self-mutated beyond the know-how of the clone company Jemini that spawned us. [...] Only our starfish can save us, by regrowing whatever grooms like me cut out of them” (20). When a woman from Saltwater City, sick with a mysterious flu, enters the Grist Village, Peristrophe Halliana, Kirilow’s lover and, most importantly, the last living starfish, becomes infected and dies. This traumatic event prompts Kirilow to travel to Saltwater City, where the flu has become a pandemic, to find a way to save her sisters. Here, she joins hands with Kora, who turns out to be a starfish, but they are kidnapped by a group of men who are releasing new technology to save the world from the flu and need Grist sisters – as well as other “disposable” denizens from Saltwater City to test it.

Lai creates a forward-looking story that materialises many anxieties troubling our present, and, by sidelining to the periphery of the action all the male characters with infection, she reverses a male-dominated universe through a feminist lens. As she declares in an interview, she was “consciously writing against Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, in which the woman kills herself at the start of the novel, ceding the story to the man and the boy. I wanted to write a story where the men are vulnerable and the women survive” (Lai 2019b).

As noted by Susan Watkins, contemporary white male-authored post-apocalyptic fiction “tends towards conservatism” (2020, 1) and a desire and longing for the confirmation of the *status quo*. Ideas of human civilization rely on traditional patriarchal and imperialist values and gesture toward a future that is either a “restoration of what has been lost during the apocalypse” or a “nostalgic mourning for the past” (1). What is also interesting for the present discussion is that conventional post-apocalyptic imagination cannot seem to move beyond traditional gender narratives, namely the protection of the heteronormative nuclear family unit and the obsession with the father-son bond. In *Sex After Life*, Claire Colebrook uses the term “sextinction” to define such tiring gender tropes:

It is precisely here, in the genre of the post-apocalyptic, that the most tiring gender narratives are repeated [...] One might say that it is easier to imagine the end of the world, and the end of capitalism, than it is to think outside the structuring fantasies of gender. There must always be an active male heroism driven by a feminine fragility that appears to hold the promise of the future.⁵ (2014, 150)

There is a structural similarity between post-apocalyptic pandemic narratives and the climate apocalypse, which are both relevant for the present analysis. With regard to pandemic narratives, I draw on Carlen Lavigne’s analysis of American end-of-world television series that appeared on international screens between 2001 and 2016, where she argues that most of

her case studies speak to the ambitions and fears of a straight white male audience. A repetitive scenario unfolds as follows: in a devastated landscape, a straight white male hero arises as a natural leader, while “women, non-white characters, queer characters, and all those whose identities cross over and between those groups are sidelined in favor of the straight white male lead” (2018, 7). This “lingering patriarchy” (7), however, goes unacknowledged: what these shattered worlds feature is a post-feminist and post-racial future where “the struggling hero claims leadership simply because he is the best person for the job” (7). In this way, gender binaries are reinforced, and those whose voices might challenge and disrupt the myth of heteronormative white patriarchy are excluded from the main narrative. Lavigne’s analysis encompasses *28 Days Later*, *I Am Legend*, the *Resident Evil* film series, *The Strain*, *The Walking Dead*, *Z Nation*, and a more thorough discussion of *Jeremiah* and *The Last Ship*. All these case studies tend toward conservative narratives that preserve the patriarchal family and maintain heterosexual white male leadership.⁶

By contrast, Watkins states that contemporary women writers engage with apocalyptic ideas in unprecedented ways that arise from their specific subject position rather than from the idea that women’s writing is intrinsically different from men’s. Drawing from feminist and postcolonial critiques to conservative and conventional end-of-world narratives, many women writers move beyond the self-centredness of post-apocalyptic imagination and lay bare “the relationship that exists between structural inequalities generated by patriarchy, misogyny and racism and issues such as climate change, global capitalism and techno-science” (Watkins 2020, 10).

Intersectional experiences of pandemic outbreaks

In addition to bringing women’s voices to the forefront of a disease pandemic, Lai creates a platform for queer and presumably non-white female characters fighting against systemic oppression. The novel raises questions about a world where women, being more resistant than men to the flu pandemic, become powerful leaders. Isabelle Chow, CEO of the other company that governs Saltwater City – the Höst Light Industries – is a remarkable example of grotesquely powerful corporations whose owners are worshipped in shrines like deities:

Embedded in the altar is a smiling photograph of her from when she was awarded Woman Leader of the Year, taken those few short years ago when it wasn’t a given that all Höst’s leaders were women. Beneath the photo on a wide shelf are neatly arranged statuettes and figurines of female deities as though they were all her avatars: the Virgin Mary, Kuan Yin, a nine-tailed fox lady, Green Tara, the Venus of Willendorf, Athena, Heng’e, and many more besides. (53)

Despite the centrality of these powerful women leaders in the novel’s plot, I argue that the most interesting feature of *The Tiger Flu* is its focus on intersectional experiences of the outbreak, alongside its thought-provoking concern for gender and racial justice. Disease outbreaks affect marginalised groups and at-risk communities in multiple ways, exposing and

deepening pre-existing differences and inequalities related to gender, race and ethnicity, as suggested by the storylines of Kora and Kirilow. Belonging to vulnerable, albeit different, communities, they prove that a higher male mortality rate can, nevertheless, have indirect deadly effects on women.

In Saltwater City, the pandemic widens the gap between the wealthy corporate leaders and working-class families, increasing the severity of poverty. Kora's family lacks access to basic resources, such as medical care, supply and a decent place to live: their "broken-up furniture" comes from "abandoned apartments around them" (67). Her mother, Charlotte, is a frontline health worker, and she is also the one taking on the extra labour of caring for sick family members and providing and preparing food:

Charlotte looks exhausted. Although she's not yet forty, her dull black hair is streaked with white, and dark pockets of loose skin sag beneath her eyes. She's the only family member who still has a job, as a night nurse at a nearby hospice, and she looks after the whole family on top of that. (26)

Being sent to the Cordova Dancing School for Girls, Kora is affected by the stigma associated with the flu pandemic. In fact, we come to know that her father was the one who brought the Caspian tiger back from extinction for consumptive purposes; the flu is its deadly side-effect. She is constantly discriminated from the other girls for coming from a low-income family – "[y]ou're a *rat eater*. Don't lie. Your mom and dad were too poor to feed you properly" (97; emphasis added) – which also happens to be the family that revitalised the Caspian tiger. Despite being abandoned by her father and having nothing to do with his genetic experiments, she emerges as the pandemic scapegoat:

If not for you, [...] all of the men – our brothers, fathers, uncles, and sons – would be alive today. [...] Lady Kora of the House of Ko, re-animators of the Caspian tiger [...]. How could you not know that you and your family are the source of the tiger flu? (84-85)

It is not by chance that Lai chooses a girl from a marginalised community to be the carrier of a 'foreign' virus. Kora's constant struggle against discrimination calls into question xenophobic fears and racial stigmatisation associated with disease outbreaks. If Ebola has long been portrayed as a 'black' disease and fuelled racism against African and black communities, the current Coronavirus crisis has been tinged with anti-Asian racism and xenophobia (Aratani 2020; Timothy 2020). Racist incidents against Asian communities globally have increased after US President Donald Trump labelled Covid-19 the 'Chinese' and 'foreign' virus. There is no need to look any further than my own location, the Veneto Region, one of the areas that were hit first by the virus outbreak in Italy: its Governor Luca Zaia suggested that the Coronavirus was caused by Chinese hygiene standards and cultural habits: "we have all seen the Chinese eating live mice" ("Luca Zaia" 2020).

Like Kora's mother, all the Grist sisters are involved in several forms of care work: Kirilow

is a doctor apprentice and Peristrophe Halliana can regenerate her own organs and sacrifice herself so that others can live, like many women care workers on the frontline of the Covid-19 response. As Lai underscores, between the lines of the Grist community's struggle against its own erasure, we can read other narratives of Indigenous resistance. In addition to having been created for mere consumptive purposes – “they made us to use us. When they ran out of uses, they murdered as many of us as they could and exiled the rest” (48) – the Grist community is constantly under attack by patriarchal and corporate Saltwater City. Living in isolated communities, resisting and queering current reproductive practices, and not having embraced destructive and consumptive capitalist behaviours, they cannot be granted the status of ‘fully human’: “we aren’t human” (48), “slit sluts, that’s what they call us in Saltwater City” (20). The Grist sisters undergo the invasions of their territory, both in the form of systematic land theft to look for “some kind of animal or plant they need for some kind of technology” (163) and erasure of cultural identity. Even the infectious disease brought in by outsiders – in this case, a woman from Saltwater City – is a threat to the survival of the Grist community, as it has been for multiple Indigenous populations who had limited immunity to pathogens introduced by European colonisers. Given the impact of the intersectional forms of oppression, the Grist sisters, albeit women, do not seem to be less vulnerable than men to the flu pandemic. Furthermore, in *The Tiger Flu*, Saltwater corporations take advantage of the opportunity created by the pandemic to further increase the forms of oppression and the surveillance of the Grist community. Once again, this resonates with the ways in which Covid-19 is devastating Indigenous communities across the world. In Brazil, one of the world’s worst-hit Covid-19 hotspots at the time of writing, Coronavirus has accelerated Jair Bolsonaro’s aggressive devastation of indigenous territories and deforestation of the Amazon rainforest. As Laura Burocco underscores,

[a] little more than a year after Bolsonaro’s election, the Covid pandemic comes into view as an acceleration of a plan that was already underway and that seems to be in full continuity with more ancient practices, given that pathogens have historically been one of the most powerful factors in the decimation of the indigenous peoples of South America. [...] The government’s plan shows its aggressive intent by affecting every aspect of the preservation of the territory and the lives of its people. (2020)

A Capitalocene challenge

As the previous paragraphs have shown, *The Tiger Flu* draws the readers’ attention toward various forms of structural and intersectional inequalities that are usually exposed and heightened by a disease outbreak. As philosopher Van Dooren notes with regard to the current Covid-19 crisis, these are “vital considerations. But they are not enough” (2020). Given the zoonotic nature of this disease, we must also consider human dysfunctional relationships with other animal species and the broader endangered environment, adopting a ‘one health’ approach that recognizes the interconnections between people, animals and their shared environment.⁷ Research has corroborated that the outbreaks of zoonotic diseases like Covid-

19 are on the rise and that these animal-borne pandemics are most certainly linked to human-driven environmental change, the destruction of animal habitats all over the world, the intensification of farming practices and global biodiversity crisis.⁸ In other words, “the real source of this crisis is human, not animal” (Van Dooren 2020). This is precisely where the environmental humanities can make insightful interventions. According to Jenia Mukherjee and Amrita Sen, “while natural scientists argue that animals are hosts and carriers, environmental humanities scholars trace the real source to humans” (2020); not all humans, though. As the authors suggest, a ‘Capitalocene’ framework provides a better understanding of the current crisis than the undifferentiated *antropos* implied by the ‘Anthropocene’ narrative.⁹ At the foundation of the current crisis lies capitalism’s consumptive force and its turning of habitats, environments and bodies, particularly women’s bodies, into resources to be subjugated, transformed, and exploited (Iovino 2020).

The Tiger Flu differs from outbreak-related films in popular culture, in that it does not focus on the disease emergence and infection but urges the readers to reflect upon the causes and the uneven effects of pandemics and imagine a rupture that must be brought into existence. In this case, the flu spreads around the planet thanks to a cloning company that has reintroduced the Caspian tiger for consumptive ends, namely to make addictive “tiger-bone wine.” The novel throws into relief the interconnectedness between ecological disaster and the intensive exploitation of animals. In a particularly insightful scene in which Kora gets to know in vivid detail the story of how the flu has been brought into the world, the link between the human exploitation of nature and pandemics is made clear:

Happy revellers drink from crystal glasses at first, then later, mouth to spigot as addiction deepens. Then the same vintners and revellers waste away in overstuffed hospitals and clinics from Albuquerque to Seoul to Kinshasa to New York City. The tigers pad softly into the night, and the room fills with the roar of another crumbling. Vast cliffs and towers of polar ice calve into the warming sea. A parade of long dead animals –wolves, mammoths, bears, and oxen – find their way into the wombs of their contemporary cousins. In white rooms, giant bellows expand and contract, to help those in the throes of the third wave breathe longer than they otherwise might. Oceans swell and rise to engulf whole cities. The denizens of Saltwater City construct a massive wall of earth to protect themselves. The earth’s angry maw gapes to swallow those outside. The wall falls, and the people build canals instead. The ocean swells through them, recedes, then swells again. The fourth wave of tiger flu comes. Men vomit and shrivel in dirty hospital beds, their bodies refusing to hold water. (Lai 2018, 210-211)

What is also interesting for the present discussion is that the tiger flu and the Grist sisters are both “figures of mutation that erupt unexpectedly as a consequence of humankind’s endless tampering with the flow of life” (Lai 2019a). Ecofeminist scholars have brought into sharp focus the analogy between the domination of nature and the exploitation of women that arise from the objectification of the ‘other’. As Kirilow underscores, “the Caspian tiger is no different from us – a creature that would not live now except by human intervention” (Lai 2018, 88): as such, the Grist sisters and the tiger flu are the by-products of human exceptionalism,

capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy. Both created by corporate power for consumptive purposes, they are figures of vulnerability that emerge amid the pursuit of endless growth.

Their stories force the readers to imagine a rupture and address the crisis at its root causes, shifting the focus from a mere return to normality or ‘business as usual’ to an act of repair of damaged ‘naturalcultural’ ecologies:

I feel that we’re living now in a moment where our bodies have been pushed, through scientific innovation and the harnessing of the body’s productive capabilities, to the absolute edge of their capacity to function. [...] That’s exactly the thing I’m interested in investigating – those moments when the body breaks because, in a sense, too much mind has been pushed on it. (Lai 2019a)

Envisaging a rupture

We could think of *The Tiger Flu* as a response to the wartime imagery that is being overused to address the challenges presented by the current Coronavirus. From Emmanuel Macron to Boris Johnson, let alone “wartime president” Donald Trump, male world leaders have ‘waged war’ against the ‘invisible enemy’, reinforcing harmful stereotypes of toxic masculinity and missing the chance to expose human and social responsibility and the systemic forms of inequalities.¹⁰ Conversely, Lai’s novel departs from one-against-all narratives that identify an enemy – the virus – a military strategy and (male) frontline warriors. Stories about singular heroes fighting against antagonists that are “fully evil” and must be destroyed, Lai suggests, are narratives that “belong to patriarchal forms of masculinity” (2019a). Throughout the novel, there are actually a few attempts to ‘fight’ the flu pandemic, and they all come from male characters, such as Marcus Traskin, who claims that he has “a cure for the flu. He is going to save Saltwater City. He is a hero, and you should want him to live” (Lai 2018, 226). Furthermore, the novel breaks away from tiring visions of the future that refuse to explore the indeterminacy of the present and point toward a recovery of the previous *status quo*, as embodied by some secondary characters portrayed “in a desperate attempt to *know* and so *fix* the broken world” (41; emphasis added).

The novel also expresses boredom with reassuring techno-fixes and with narratives ending with a cure that “anticipates the triumph of science and epidemiology and affirms the worth of humanity” (Wald 2008, 268). The new technology developed by Saltwater corporations to save the world from the flu becomes a tool of oppression and surveillance that denies the Grist sisters agency, presenting some uncanny similarities with what Naomi Klein has labelled “screen new deal” (2020), pointing to the high-tech Covid-19 dystopia that benefits private interests while implementing surveillance tracking. The questions Lai asks are of the utmost importance: what are the costs of techno-fixes? Who benefits from techno-fixes and who is left behind? What is also important is that this ‘revolutionary’ technology can save minds but not bodies. As the author has declared in many interviews in regard to the body-mind split, the way that it “emerges in Western culture through the Judeo-Christian inheritance, the

Enlightenment, the rise of technology, and hyper-capitalism, [...] all the trouble with patriarchy, climate change, is a consequence of that split, of insufficient value placed on bodies, especially women's bodies" (Lai 2019a). Contrarily, the Grist sisters "believe that body and mind exist together in harmonious balance. When one dies the person no longer exists" (Lai 2018, 294).

Lai's novel does not function as a blueprint for the future, though. By the end of the story, Kirilow joins hands with Kora and together they roll "towards a strange and *unknown* future" (259; emphasis added). *The Tiger Flu* neither proposes a progress tale nor ends the story with ruins and decay that would force us to abandon all hope. As noted by Tsing, indeterminacy, precarity and vulnerability to others are the very conditions of our time. Learning to coexist with economic ruination, ecological disturbance and potential future global pandemics means living "without those handrails, which once made us think we knew, collectively, where we were going" (2015, 2). She argues that the paradigmatic figure of this time is the *matsutake* wild mushroom: growing in daunting and human-disturbed forests, it can guide us through the ruined landscape that has become our collective home. By living a transformative relation with trees, *matsutake* makes it evident that we cannot live without collaborative survival across human and species differences.¹¹ She also writes that mushroom picking will not save us, but it might reopen our imaginations and shift them away from progress and one-against-all stories.

In this regard, the Grist storyline is one of these rupture narratives, in that it portrays resilience, the restoration of ancestral knowledge, resistance to cultural appropriation, decolonial practices and a thought-provoking human-plant relation: "[w]e Grist sisters feel our way to other knowings" (Lai 2018, 36). The most precious crop they harvest is called "forget-me-do," originally bred in the factories of Saltwater City together with the Grist clones but subsequently appropriated, mutated and refined by the Grist sisters themselves and seeded through mallow, agave and sage. Forget-me-do infused tea makes them feel pain as pleasure and replaces "poisonous medicines from the time before" (184). Most importantly, it comes to signify cultural resistance and survival, as "through its use, [they] cultivate what [they] remember and what [they] forget in order to make Grist history" (43). Weaving, sewing, and even suturing are performed using various organic and sustainable materials, such as plant and mushroom fibres. From tents to gauzes, everything in their village is made out of mushrooms. As Lai notices in an interview, there is a striking similarity between Tsing's *matsutake* mushrooms and the Grist sisters, both "erupting in the wake of human-induced disaster" (2019b). The novel's idea of exploring the possibilities of life in the wake of disturbing and troubling times is also indebted to Haraway's forward-looking approach to our globally endangered environment. The urgent task is to engage with one other – "in all of our bumptious kinds" – to stir up potent responses and cultivate what she labels "response-ability" on a damaged earth (2016, 1). *Staying with the trouble* means "learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as

mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings” (Haraway 2016, 1)

Restoring and repairing the world require learning to live and die with one another in multispecies ways that are not prone to disasters and addressing our current state of urgency in relational rather than dialectical ways. To borrow from environmental literary scholar Kate Rigby (2015), we should learn to “dance with disaster,” that is to say, developing compartments that are no longer based on the promise of stability, but rather explore the indeterminacy and unpredictability of our mixed-up times. As a key feature of this dance, Rigby posits the rejection of cultural narratives grounded in hostile attitudes toward the natural world – allegedly retaliating against human beings – “at the very time when we most need to appreciate the connectivities, both material and moral, linking human well-being with that of other living beings” (10). Although Rigby refers to eco-catastrophes, I argue that a similar approach could help us reconceptualise pandemics not as wars between humans (read: men) and viruses but rather as an opportunity to expose structural inequalities, build and sustain new alliances and intersectional relationalities, and claim a future that does acknowledge the current rupture.¹²

As Lai suggests, this is a feature of feminist fiction, which is relational in the first instance. She further claims that *The Tiger Flu* is not about one man against the world but deals with “a group of people facing a crisis and resolving it collectively, while still having their differences” (Lai 2019a). The intersectional, multispecies collective that emerges from the pandemic crisis imagines the world anew pointing toward a green and feminist future. Indeed, after exposing the dysfunctionality of narratives based on perpetual progress and growth and on human exceptionalism, and their complicity with the ongoing subordination of nature and ‘others’, the novel builds relationships across gender, race, species and plants and explores alternative forms of production and reproduction beyond capitalism. Through feminist, queer, anti-capitalist and anti-racist resistance, a different gaze on the crisis is cultivated, and a radical systemic change is envisaged: one that raises women’s voices and experiences and proposes a new paradigm for care work, which must be considered not as unpaid and feminised domestic labour but as collective care for our human, social and environmental fragility. As Arundhati Roy writes, this crisis can be a gateway between this world and the next one:

We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it. (2020).

Notes

¹ See the ongoing analysis from the research group Global Health 50/50, a leading authority in gender equality and global health (The Sex, Gender and Covid-19 Project, n.d.).

² See Rabin 2020. For a discussion of the correlation between ‘macho’ stereotypes and male vulnerability to Covid-19, see Burrell and Ruxton 2020.

³ The term ‘natureculture’ was coined by Donna Haraway in *The Companion Species Manifesto* (2003) in order to challenge the ontological divide between nature and culture.

⁴ The name invokes the Cantonese appellation *Haam Sui Fauh*, ‘saltwater city’, used by early Chinese

immigrants to describe Vancouver (see Thom 2018).

⁵ Colebrook acknowledges that she builds on the preface to *The Seeds of Time* by Fredric Jameson: “It seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism” (2014, xii).

⁶ Similarly, post-apocalyptic climate fiction tends to revolve around men: the protagonists with decision-making authorities are often the white male heroes, mainly research scientists – the paradigmatic figure of the Anthropocene (Yusoff 2015) – and government officials. Power and agency are divided along racial, ethnic and gender lines, and women are a silent backdrop and a site of innate vulnerability (Mcgreavy and Londendeld 2014; Gaard 2017). The most prominent examples are Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006) and Roland Emmerich’s *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004).

⁷ Zoonotic diseases, also called zoonoses, are infectious diseases passed by non-human animals to humans. At the time of writing, DNA evidence suggests that the novel Coronavirus is likely a bat-borne infection, while it is not clear yet whether the illegal pangolins trade is also involved. For a discussion of animal-borne pandemics, see David Quammen’s bestseller *Spillover: Animal Infections and the Next Human Pandemic* (2012).

⁸ See Smith et al. 2014.

⁹ For an enlightening debate about the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene, see Moore 2015 and Haraway 2016.

¹⁰ See Smith 2020.

¹¹ “The fungus gets its carbohydrates from mutualistic relations with the roots of its host trees, for whom it also forages. Matsutake makes it possible for host trees to live in poor soils, without fertile humus. In turn, they are nourished by the trees” (Tsing 2015, 40).

¹² In this regard, immunologist Antonella Viola from the University of Padua has claimed that we should “dance” with this virus (“L’immunologa Viola smentisce i complottisti irriducibili” 2020), using a very different language from the military one we keep hearing in (mostly male) speeches and conversations about the current pandemic.

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Israel/Palestine/Covid-19: one more weapon in the siege?

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ABSTRACT

The seemingly endless conflict between Israel and the Palestinian people is typically seen as structured around or based on struggles over land, sovereignty and identity (national or religious). The extent to which health is an issue – particularly a consistent, deliberate, even central element in the aggression, rather than a random or unfortunate by-product of the larger struggle – is less readily recognised. This article will briefly examine some of the principal health issues created by the conflict before addressing the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic for the Palestinians, particularly in the context of the ongoing Israeli siege of Gaza. Finally, the works of the poet Mahmoud Darwish are analysed to see how Palestinians respond culturally to such a situation and how they attempt to stay hopeful in times of affliction.

Keywords

Covid-19, Israel, Palestine, prison, siege, Mahmoud Darwish

On 26 March 2020, Israeli forces in the West Bank destroyed a Palestinian medical facility that was in the process of construction and confiscated all building and medical equipment. The field clinic was being set up as part of the response to the rapidly expanding coronavirus pandemic, as well as to address the appalling state of healthcare provisions in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Although this kind of behaviour is something that Palestinians undergo routinely, the destruction of a medical facility – however small-scale and under-supplied, in the face of the dangers represented by the advancing Covid-19 pandemic – might have struck foreign consumers of news as deeply shocking and callously life-threatening, had it ever made it onto their screens or newspaper pages. Unfortunately, although Israeli obstruction and destruction of Palestinian attempts at self-improvement, or the construction of a normal life, are a daily occurrence: assaults – often brutal – on numerous aspects of Palestinian health are in many ways as frequent, though rather less commented on. It is against this particular background that we will attempt, in due course, to identify some of the ways in which the coronavirus pandemic is being manipulated in the relationship between Israel and Palestine.

Although that relationship needs to be understood as one constituted by “the hundred years’ war on Palestine,” in the words of Rashid Khalidi’s recent powerful analysis (2020), the century of aggression is nevertheless typically seen as structured around or based on strug-

gles over land, sovereignty, and identity (national or religious). The extent to which health is an issue – particularly a consistent, deliberate, even central element in the aggression, rather than a random or unfortunate by-product of the larger struggle – is less readily recognised. However, the nature and scale of attacks on the Palestinian body, as well as on the would-be protectors of that body, require acknowledgement.

Bodily issues, images, and metaphors also permeate the wider political debate. One of these is the question of vulnerability. It has always been, and remains, one of the central claims of the Israeli state, that Israel and its inhabitants exist in a condition of vulnerability, threatened by a range of enemies, mainly external, but also internal. In fact, something like the opposite is the case: even in 1948, when Israel was notionally at its most vulnerable, its politicians and military commanders knew very well – though they did not admit it publicly – that their forces were better armed, better trained and more highly motivated than the ones they faced. Although this has the air of a secret well-kept from the wider world, British government papers released in recent years indicate that the British also knew that the Israelis were going to win. As the years have passed, the claim has been harder to sustain, but so frequently and vehemently has it been repeated, that the idea that the massively militarised and illegally nuclear-armed state of Israel might be ‘vulnerable’ to the ‘terrorism’ of Palestinian teenagers throwing stones could still be taken seriously (by some at least). Against this mythic tableau of vulnerability, the actual daily vulnerability of Palestinians is very rarely perceived. The great Palestinian poet, Mahmoud Darwish, to whom we will return later in this piece, has some insightful things to say on a related issue – the mythic and inflated claims to victimhood made by one party versus the demonstrable quotidian facts of the victimisation suffered by the other.¹

A number of critics, perhaps most consistently the Nazareth-based British writer Jonathan Cook, have argued that regardless of the changing faces, or the ideological masks those faces wear, in Israeli politics, what does not alter is the determination that the Palestinians must be removed from Eretz Israel. Indeed, the acknowledgement that the (regrettable for some) removal of the Palestinians is an unavoidable corollary of the establishment of a Jewish homeland goes back to the early days of the Zionist movement in the 1880s. In pursuance of that aim, certain steps are obvious, others more experimental. Cook’s 2008 book, *Disappearing Palestine*, is subtitled *Israel’s Experiments in Human Despair*. As Cook says,

It is my contention that Israel has turned the increasingly confined spaces left to the Palestinians not only into open-air cages but also into laboratories where experiments to encourage Palestinian despair, and ultimately emigration, are being refined. In fact, these experiments were begun inside Israel, only being ‘exported’ to the occupied territories after their conquest in the 1967 war (2008, 7).

Cook’s highlighting of despair is an important reminder of the extent to which assaults on Palestinian health are intended to undermine mental as well as physical well-being.

In terms of assaults on the Palestinian body, some are obvious and straightforward, e.g.

killing Palestinians as a way to remove some while potentially encouraging others to leave. Under the rubric of killing, some methods are, once again, straightforward, for example full-scale military assault as in 1948, while others are definitely more experimental, like the truck and car bombs first tried out against Palestinian markets in the 1920s, or hotel bombings like the King David Hotel in 1946, designed to terrorise as many constituencies as possible.² Within the ‘obviousness’ of military assault, for example against the Palestinians in Beirut in 1982, or the Palestinians in Gaza in 2008 and 2014, Israel has experimented with different kinds of weaponry, most of them illegal. These include vacuum bombs, cluster bombs, phosphorus bombs and uranium-based weapons, all of them so appallingly murderous that the psychological impact on bystanders or survivors is shattering. Even battle-hardened war correspondents can find the experience too much to bear, an example being Robert Fisk’s heart-rending reporting on the deaths of Palestinian children from Israeli phosphorous bombs in the Siege of Beirut (Fisk 1990).

Blurring the borders of killing has been perhaps the most recent experiment in Israeli military practice, used most extensively against the peaceful participants in the Great March of Return from 2018 onwards. Although the expenditure of enormous quantities of live ammunition by the Israelis unsurprisingly resulted in the deaths of many unarmed protesters, at the same time, the ‘experimental’ dimension was in the relatively new practice of shoot-to-maim (rather than the standard shoot-to-kill) deployed on a large scale. In her 2017 book *The Right to Maim*, Jasbir Puar develops a complex analysis of the biopolitics of maiming in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict:

Maiming thus functions not as an incomplete death or an accidental assault on life, but as the end goal in the dual production of permanent disability via the infliction of harm and the attrition of the life-support systems that might allow populations to heal from this harm. Maiming is required. Not merely a by-product of war, of war’s collateral damage, it is used to achieve the tactical aims of settler colonialism (Puar 2017, 143).

Maiming is not only an attack on the body and health of the individual, but also of the community. It produces an unhealthy, traumatised body, unable either to function as it previously did, to return to full health, or to find appropriate release in death (supposing such an outcome might be desirable). Such bodies are potentially more docile, or at least less able, it is assumed, to resist oppressive state practices. At the same time as it removes a certain kind of pressure on the Israeli state (somewhat fewer Palestinians are being slaughtered, so there is less likelihood of any international outcry), maiming increases the pressures on a catastrophically over-stretched Palestinian healthcare system, as well as the wider community attempting to look after its injured members with the scarcest of resources.

Deliberately induced scarcity is another way in which Israeli policy impacts the health of Palestinians. Among the many forms of this immiseration, we might mention:

- poverty: Israel’s ongoing dismissal of Palestinians in favour of immigrant workers has

produced levels of unemployment in Gaza which have passed 70%;

- hunger: the loss of their land, and increasingly restricted access to what remains, combined with the routine destruction of all-important olive groves by Israeli settlers, and the spraying of crop-killing pesticides by the military – notionally to ‘clear’ border zones – drastically reduces the Palestinians’ ability to feed themselves;
- thirst/drought: Israel steals most of the water intended for Palestinians from their three main aquifers, including the River Jordan, resulting in Gaza having almost no safe or clean water whatsoever – a problem exacerbated by the Israeli destruction of water pumping facilities in Gaza, and the fact that even where pumps exist, there is only electricity to run them for a couple of hours a day.

All of these contribute to increases in disease and general ill-health, mental as well as physical, to be tackled by a healthcare system which is deprived of the most basic resources by the continuing Israeli blockade of Gaza, and which has lost buildings, equipment, services and personnel as a result of Israeli military action.

The latter point is perhaps the most shocking in the long list of Israeli violations of ethical norms and international law. Although those killed (rather than maimed) on the Great March of Return included doctors, paramedics and ambulance personnel, all wearing high visibility clothing indicating their status, some of them killed while tending to others who had already been wounded, including a paramedic treating a doctor shot in both legs, they are only the latest victims of the repeated deliberate targeting of hospitals, clinics, ambulances, medical teams and individuals. The standard excuse, repeated after every attack, is that the particular hospital or clinic was being used as a base by enemy forces, and was therefore judged to be a legitimate target, though curiously – even in this age of close-up drone footage of everything – no evidence is ever produced. One of the worst recent examples was the Israeli onslaught on Gaza in 2014, in which seventeen hospitals and fifty-six primary healthcare centres were destroyed or damaged, twenty-three medical workers were killed, a further seventy-eight were injured, and forty-five ambulances were destroyed or damaged. The following year, the charity Medical Aid for Palestinians produced a report entitled *No More Impunity*. Five years on, so little has changed that its 2020 update bears the somewhat depressing title *Chronic Impunity* (MAP 2020).

In addition to destroying the Palestinian healthcare system, Israel blocks attempts at its reconstruction, forbidding the import of essential materials and equipment, from concrete for hospital buildings, to ventilators (now likely to be required for Covid patients), everything being deemed potentially ‘dual purpose’, i.e. capable of use in a military context, as well as its alleged purpose. Quite how you deploy ventilators militarily has yet to be explained. Similarly, blocking the reconstruction at the level of personnel is standard: in 2018, Israel refused 98% of the applications made for permission to leave the Strip in order to follow medical training of one sort or another. Forgetting about reconstruction, in the current situation even attempts at

staying alive can meet with official sanction: on 3 April 2020, Fadi Al-Hadami, the Minister for Jerusalem Affairs of the Palestinian Authority, was arrested at home in the middle of the night and beaten; on 5 April, Adnan Ghaith, the Palestinian Governor of Jerusalem, was also arrested at home. Both were charged with the crime of ‘Palestinian activity in Jerusalem’, which amounted to setting up disinfection stations, and urging fellow citizens to stay at home and stay safe.

As well as the repeated military assaults, Gaza has suffered more than thirteen years of an Israeli blockade so severe that the territory has been referred to by many commentators as ‘the biggest prison in the world’. The process of imprisoning is somewhat older, however. As Naomi Klein remarks, “1993 had been held up as the dawn of a new hopeful era; instead, it was the year that the occupied territories were transformed from run-down dormitories housing the underclass of the Israeli state into suffocating prisons” (Klein 2007, 546). Given that, it is perhaps appropriate that prisons provide our point of entry into examining in more detail the politics of the coronavirus pandemic in Israel and Palestine. As well as the ‘norms’ of the prison system, including routine torture (Israel is still the only country to formally sanction the use of torture), inappropriate detention (the young, the sick, the elderly), illegal confinement (imprisonment without trial or determined length of sentence, known as administrative detention), neglect of medical conditions or injuries, refusal of medical treatment, overcrowding and a lack of sanitation, Palestinian prisoners now have to deal with the threat of the coronavirus. The first confirmed case of the virus in the Palestinian population was that of a prisoner, infected, as far as can be determined, by an Israeli prison officer. This then resulted in a number of Palestinian prisoners, who might or might not have the virus, being removed from Peta Tikvah to Ramle and placed in insanitary quarantine conditions. As Carl Cattermole, author of *Prison: A Survival Guide*, has argued, the prison environment works as “a petri dish” for the development of a range of infections (Rizvi 2020, 12). That potential for infection, which is present even in what might be considered better quality penal establishments, is obviously increased in the conditions in which Palestinian prisoners exist. In response to the danger posed by overcrowded prisons, a growing number of countries have been reducing their level of inmates, though few have gone as far as the Indian state of Maharashtra, which is currently aiming to halve its prison population of 35,000. At the same time, Israel has, sadly – and despite international appeals not to behave in this way – been increasing the arrests of Palestinians, especially children, who already constitute an inappropriately large proportion of the prison population.

It is not only the official prisoners who suffer in relation to the virus: on 23 March, Haaretz carried a report about a Palestinian worker in Israel who, having displayed coronavirus-like symptoms, was tested, but before the results were ready was picked up by the police, handcuffed and dumped by the side of the road at the Maccabim checkpoint near Ramallah, where he apparently lay until an ambulance came to collect him.

The connection – on the face of it, perhaps not the most obvious of linkages – between health and settler colonialism, highlighted in the quotation from Jasbir Puar above, is brutally foregrounded by events in Israel. Benny Ganz, Benjamin Netanyahu’s three-time opponent for the premiership, having repeatedly sworn never to serve under Netanyahu, is now doing precisely that, having joined him in a government of ‘national unity’. The stated aim of the new government is to combat Covid-19 (though only in Israel apparently). However, the only action currently being discussed behind the smokescreen of tackling the virus is the massive theft of Palestinian land in the West Bank, given the go-ahead by Donald Trump’s ‘visionary’ plan for the region. (As I write, Mike Pompeo has just flown into Tel Aviv for discussions with Netanyahu about this egregious plunder). In its arrogance and insouciance, this represents another kind of Israeli experiment, this time in how to grab land. The classic approach has been, in the phrase much repeated by Prime Minister David Ben Gurion, “one dunum, one goat”. Taking Palestinian land and livelihood a notional one dunum (i.e. approximately 1000 m²) at a time continues to this day. The incremental spread of illegal settlements on Palestinian land follows this pattern: grab a little land – in this case, a strategic hilltop – get military backup to deal with unhappy Palestinians, gradually build your settlement. Set against that low visibility, ‘softly’ approach, the level of land theft currently envisaged requires something on the scale of a global pandemic to divert international attention. Although events have yet to unfold, there remains the possibility that Covid-19 may constitute a double tragedy for the Palestinian people: firstly, in the loss of life, and secondly in loss of land, both potentially on a scale which may be extremely difficult to recover from.

The idea behind the government of national unity, that ‘we need to get together to fight the coronavirus, and that is our national priority’, is interesting, given that we are led to believe that Israel has in fact already beaten the virus. In the first week in May, there was an online gathering, small, select, and self-congratulatory, of the First Movers, the leaders of the countries who think they have got the virus on the run. These included Austria, Singapore, Greece, Australia, Norway, and Israel. The First Movers swapped tips on how to beat the virus and set out what they thought their own particular success consisted of. In Israel’s case, it was, to no one’s great surprise doubtless, high-tech surveillance. As Naomi Klein has argued, the development of the Israeli economy into one specialising in high-tech processes and homeland security has had a profound effect on the region, not least in the dwindling prospects for any meaningful peace: “The extraordinary performance of Israel’s homeland security companies is well known to stock watchers, but it is rarely discussed as a factor in the politics of the region. It should be” (Klein 2007, 555).

In addition to the ‘biggest prison’ image, the condition of Gaza over the last thirteen years has typically been referred to as a siege, and certainly Israel’s stranglehold on the territory has been as unrelenting, brutal, and inhumane as anything produced in earlier military history. In this case, however, there is a deeply ironic difference: sieges are typically long drawn out

assaults on places too well defended to be captured in a single attack: castles, walled cities and other strongholds. Gaza, of course, is the opposite of that: the ‘walls’ around it are built, maintained and manned by the besiegers; there is nowhere for the besieged to hide from the weapons ranged against them; they have nothing remotely comparable with which to defend themselves; their state of health, their lives and deaths, are in the hands of their besiegers. There is, however, a way in which Gaza more closely resembles a mediaeval siege. If the besiegers could not fight their way to victory, they relied on a process of attrition: hunger, thirst, and disease would be the weapons to defeat the besieged. Thus far, Gaza has not been brought to its knees by repeated and increasingly murderous Israeli attacks; it has survived years of hunger, thirst and material deprivation; it will be interesting to see what role disease now plays in the search for a final, conclusive Israeli victory, of the sort that exiled Israeli historian Ilan Pappé adumbrates in his appropriately titled 2017 book, *The Biggest Prison on Earth: A History of the Occupied Territories*. Pappé logs the way that Israel, particularly over the fifteen years since it ‘withdrew’ from the Gaza Strip, has engaged in ever-larger and ever-more deadly assaults on the territory. It is also significant that each of the military operations has involved a degree of experimentation: particular kinds of weaponry, the nature of the deployment of the weaponry, the levels of civilian casualties that might cause international condemnation (or not). As Pappé comments: “And if the Israeli generals wanted to know how such operations would be received at home, in the region and in the wider world, the answer was ‘very well’: namely, no governments showed any interest in the scores of dead and hundreds of wounded Palestinians left behind after First Rain” – the 2005 attack that set the pattern for those that followed – “subsided” (2017, 216). Other strategies having thus far failed, it is hard not to see Israel’s behaviour in relation to Covid-19 and Gaza as another approach to their overall aim of removing the Palestinian population, a potentially lethal form of coercion, the latest experiment, the newest weapon in the apparently never-ending siege. While the idea of Israel deliberately creating a Covid-centred humanitarian disaster in Gaza remains speculative, what is beyond doubt is that they are doing nothing whatsoever to prevent one. Having closed off the access points to the Strip, they have ensured that no medicine or medical equipment can get in to prop up the shattered health care system, and meanwhile, despite the sophistication of their own system, as well as its current ‘capacity’, they are offering nothing by way of help. At the same time, closing the borders turns Gaza into the perfect overcrowded environment for the production of a devastating local pandemic.

How, then, as a Palestinian, do you respond to such a siege? One very Palestinian way of responding is culturally. That can obviously take time, though we have already seen the young Palestinian musician Nai Barghouti setting Darwish’s poem “Think of Others” to music and dedicating it to Covid-19 sufferers. (The recording was done on a smartphone under lockdown conditions).

When I composed Mahmoud Darwish's inspiring poem, 'Think of Others', I was indeed thinking of so many others. Of Palestinians under a 13-year 'lockdown' in Gaza, or in crowded refugee camps. Of communities fighting repression, poverty, racism and structural oppression. Of courageous medics and humanitarian workers worldwide resisting the pandemic.

When humanity as a whole is facing this unique threat, I feel it is our moral duty to lift up the voices of particularly those who must cling on to hope for a more just and peaceful future while relentlessly resisting systems of injustice. This video is my attempt to fulfil this duty. (QudsN 2020)

Darwish himself, as something of an expert in sieges, would no doubt have had something to say on the subject. As a member of the Palestine National Council, he was in Beirut throughout the Israeli siege of 1982, producing some important poetry and a prose memoir, *Memory for Forgetfulness* (Williams 2013). In 2002, he was in Ramallah when the Israelis attacked. His response was the epic poem *State of Siege*, produced, despite its length, at considerable speed. Giving the impression of a hastily written siege diary, its 115 sections range from one- or two-line epigrammatic fragments to entire poems. Although it is clearly grounded in the events of 2002, where the attempt to crush the Second Intifada resulted in the widespread and repressive lockdown of Palestinian communities, the poem also gives a sense of life under occupation (and there had been over half a century of it when Darwish wrote his poem) as an unending siege. In health terms, the siege, unsurprisingly, has negative effects, both mentally and physically. Despair, depression and terminal boredom are likely, though they can also have unexpected consequences:

The siege will drag on
till the besieging, like the besieged,
discover that to be bored is to be human.
(Darwish 2004, 14)

Pain and grief are widespread, and the former threatens to render the attempt to turn it into poetry pointless:

Rhyme is redundant
when the tune can't be tuned
and pain is beyond measure.
(Darwish 2004, 14)

The grief is frequently that of parents for their children killed in the siege, sometimes fighting and dying as 'martyrs', but also simply shot by the Israelis:

The Mother said:
I never noticed him wet with his own blood.
I never noticed the blood on the floor.
He lent against the wall drinking camomile tea
planning what to do tomorrow.
(Darwish 2004, 18)

Wounds, physical and mental, are common, indeed, the idea of wounded Palestinians, even a ‘Palestinian wound’, was part of Darwish’s recurrent imagery, particularly in his earlier works. And then there is death, an ever-present threat, though not an inevitable fate:

Soldiers gauge the gap between being
and nothingness
through the crosshairs of a tank sight.
We gauge the gap between ourselves
and the shells
through our instincts’ sixth sense.
(Darwish 2004, 10)

Faced with all of this, how do you cope? The opening stanza makes it memorably clear:

We do what prisoners do
We do what the unemployed do:
We cultivate hope.
(Darwish 2004, 8)

This modest introduction is key to perhaps the most important survival strategy on offer. Hope runs throughout the poem, overtly, and behind the scenes. It is noticeable that the most health-focused stanza foregrounds both hope and another essential characteristic – resistance – as well as pointing out that not all infections are equal:

To resist means a check-up
to ensure that your balls and your heart are still ticking,
to make sure you’re infected with a sickness called Hope.
(Darwish 2004, 29)

The modes of resistance are many, from the armed struggle through to a simple refusal to surrender or go away. Darwish also returns to a phrase he made famous in a poem from the Siege of Beirut, “Besiege your siege!”. Then, it was the defenders of the city who were called to adopt this strategy; now, it is poetry that is being enjoined to fight back. In both cases, the task is daunting.

What all the forms of resistance share, however, is the fact that they spring from a life lived hopefully, in spite of everything that the siege continues to throw at them. They are the responses of those identified by Nai Barghouti “who must cling on to hope for a more just and peaceful future while relentlessly resisting systems of injustice” (QudsN 2020). One hopeful attempt by the besieged to end the slaughter through a truce in which, among other things, “we could fight our battles with poetry, for once” is rejected by the besiegers:

But they told us: haven’t you heard that peace begins at home?
What happens if your music brings our high walls tumbling down?
And we answered: So what’s wrong with that? Why not?
(Darwish 2004, 31)

Whether these are the illegal Israeli separation wall or the walls around Gaza, one side has an investment in making sure they stay in place.

The poem ends with a dozen brief stanzas on images of peace, the repetition of the word almost like a meditation mantra or a religious prayer. The final one encapsulates the hope for survival:

Peace sings of life – here, in the midst of life,
wind running free through fields ripe with wheat.
(Darwish 2004, 32)

Without knowing what is to come, we must hope, above all hope for a life – even, somehow, one running free – for the besieged inhabitants of Gaza.

Notes

¹ See, for example, Darwish 1997.

² For an extended discussion of Jewish and Israeli terrorism, see Suarez 2017.

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Will Covid-19 break time and space? Schematic notes on unnatural borders

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ABSTRACT

Battling a lockdown-induced theoretical paralysis, the author attempts an analysis of the central role that spatio-temporal border closures have played in the world since the emergence of Covid-19. Has the coronavirus broken time? Can we declare the time since the onset of the pandemic a new epoch? This heuristic and schematic essay is divided into three parts. The first section draws from Helge Jordheim's work on Reinhart Koselleck's theory of temporality in relationship to the periodization of historical eras. If Covid-19 has inaugurated a new era, what do we lose or gain from declaring it so? Narrating this crisis as a temporal break between a before and after accomplishes ideological agendas for both the left and right and is a very dangerous trend. The second section reflects on what has happened to (national) borders since the outbreak of Covid-19, not only the closures but also some of the surprising openings that have taken place. For example, the arch-Brexiters whose Brexit campaign slogan was "taking back control" of the country's borders did not, like so many other countries, close their borders in the early days of the pandemic. The last section interrogates whether the eradication of the virus in one enclosed locale is adequate. If it is thriving anywhere on this earth, are any of us safe even if we imagine that borders can remain sealed forever more? A global pandemic necessitates a global response but global leadership has been woefully lacking.

Keywords

globalization, deglobalization, periodization, Reinhart Koselleck, spatio-temporality, Southern Africa

The word 'pandemic' comes from the Greek and means all people. Although everyone acknowledges that viruses, like love, do not respect borders and the coronavirus is already everywhere, there has been no coordinated global response to combat the Covid-19 global pandemic. Instead, border thinking is on steroids.

In almost every country/region/province/state/city/town on earth, the reaction to the coronavirus has been to batten down, to hunker within, to become hyper-local and react with suspicion towards the people on the other side of the boundary line, whether that be a national border or the walls surrounding a gated residential community. The immediate response to Covid-19 was to slam borders of various types shut, as quickly and thoroughly as possible.

In reference to politics not viruses, Amy Chua writes that 21st-century political polarization has become tribal in nature: "When groups feel threatened, they retreat into tribalism. They close ranks and become more insular, more defensive, more punitive, more us-versus-them" (2018). Something about the fear of disease has evoked the same tribal response that lends

itself too well to “Othering,” xenophobia and a whole host of other phobias and -isms. We are all eager to attribute the coronavirus to “those” people. It does not come from “us” but from some “them” external to us. This place must be protected from “them” and we will endeavor to make/keep our place safe. Close the border!

Is the natural response to disease to withdraw, retreat and exclude those from elsewhere?

As an academic researcher working on globalization, migration and borders, I should be very interested in this question, but I find it extraordinarily difficult to engage with the subject even as I am, like large swathes of the world population, living in lockdown with tightly sealed provincial and national borders preventing me from travelling. As I write this, I am sitting in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg in a large and comfortable middle-class home of the type occupied by South Africa’s better-off denizens. I complain of my gilded prison and joke that it feels like I am under house arrest because South Africa’s lockdown is so severe but of course, every moment, I am guilty and depressed because I know I am so much luckier than the 247 migrants from Lesotho down the road who live next to the Braamfontein Spruit on some open communal land across from the stables and the park used by the wealthier for horse-riding and dog-walking. Or at least those were the uses of those spaces prior to their closures during lockdown.

It is the migrant – especially the undocumented who must perforce occupy the shadowy borderlands of living ‘illegally’ – who is “suffering more in the current pandemic” (Mezzadra 2020). These people worked as waste-pickers and construction workers prior to the pandemic. They lived without their spouses or children who were presumably left behind across the border in the long southern African tradition of male labor migration (Dodson 2013). Pre-Coronavirus and during the pandemic, they draw their daily water provisions from one lonely water tap. They have no proper houses to shelter within. Their roofs are mostly tree branches and discarded metal and plastic. Even though this neighborhood with all its walls and gated public roads (Weintroub 2019) is one of Johannesburg’s exclusive “fortified enclaves of purified space” (Murray 2011, 324) made that way through apartheid spatial planning, these men form part of the ‘invisible’ poor sleeping rough in areas of affluence in post-apartheid but still unequal South Africa (Charlton 2019). As the southern hemisphere winter takes hold in June and July and we wake to frost on the lawn, I think of these men because although we live in such geographical proximity – they are less than a five-minute walk away – we are occupying entirely different realities. Johannesburg is infamously a “city of extremes” (Murray 2011).

There is a hard border between us and them, so we while our days away working on our laptops, convening over Zoom, streaming Netflix series and exercising to YouTube videos from fitness instructors as far away as Egypt, the Philippines, South Korea, the UK, New Zealand etc., we are taking the “global gym” experience to a whole new virtual and world-straddling level (Myambo 2014). What can those men do there all day without protection from the ele-

ments or electricity? What can they do with so little access to the internet because South African mobile phone rates for data and for calls are so astronomically high? As in other developing countries like India (see Banerjee 2020), the coronavirus was imported into South Africa by middle-class travellers coming from Europe and the US, but now these men who have presumably never been overseas are bearing the brunt of lockdown. And why has the City of Johannesburg municipality not properly housed them all these years?

It is not because they are migrants. Although South Africa is notoriously xenophobic, the government has also failed to properly house its own citizens since democracy ostensibly replaced apartheid in 1994 (Horber 2020). But in this moment of pandemic and lockdown, national borders and the ways they create hierarchies between ‘citizens’ and ‘non-citizens’ have taken on a new saliency in southern Africa as elsewhere and it is the so-called non-citizen who is allegedly not native to this land who finds herself at the lower end of this pecking order (see Mukumbang, Ambe, and Adebisi 2020). That is part of the reason I find it hard to offer a cool-headed critique of how coronavirus is tweaking the configurations of the borders of capital and the nation and the space of citizenship right in front of our very eyes, because even prior to Covid-19, I had a long-standing, natural hostility to borders. This is no doubt the consequence of my personal family history.

The colonial borders imposed by the imperial European powers at the Congress of Berlin in 1884-5 still define African nations’ territorial limits today. For some reason, the various projects of resistance, ranging from anti-colonialism to decolonialism, have yet to change Africans’ curious investment and pride in their externally-imposed national borders (see Frassinelli 2019, 7-8). I have never fully embraced this investment.

Ndima, my home village, clings to a steep mountainside between former Portuguese colony Mozambique and former British colony Zimbabwe. The unnatural border divides the Ndauspeaking peoples who have long inhabited the region but now find themselves citizens of different countries. My family WhatsApp group includes the colonial languages of Portuguese and English as well as Ndau, Zezuru and ChiManyika and other languages like Zulu and Setswana from further south, as many members of my paternal family have relocated to South Africa. Of course, my grandfather, like so many millions of African men hailing from as far north as Malawi was a migrant laborer who worked in South Africa and only returned to Ndima once a year. Migration and movement across various borders – social, cultural, ethnic, linguistic, territorial, national, historical, religious – is the foundational way of life for the mobile denizens of southern Africa. The official closing of national borders in the wake of Covid-19 has merely revealed how porous they are and have always been.

Since my very existence in this world is the result of promiscuous border-crossings – my maternal family is Italian-American and everyone laughs when I say my grandfather’s name was Guido – I like to remind myself that all borders are man-made and thus unnatural. They are Janus-faced social constructs to separate ‘us’ from ‘them’ but for me, no matter which side

of a border I find myself on, I will always be separated from someone I love.

For these reasons of personal biography and a lockdown-induced theoretical paralysis, I have struggled to analyze the central role that border closures have played in the world since the World Health Organization declared the outbreak of Covid-19 a global pandemic on 11 March 2020. However, in my role as an academic researcher, I have to quell my anxieties and attempt a more intellectual assessment. What follows is a series of schematic notes which reflect the uncertainties of the current moment. It is heuristic in nature and more cautionary essay than categorical scholarly article.

Some of the notes in this essay grew out of the online launch of a special issue of the journal of *New Global Studies* that I co-edited with Professor Pier Paolo Frassinelli. “Borders Thirty Years after the Fall of the Berlin Wall” was published in late 2019 just a few weeks before China announced to the world that a novel coronavirus had emerged. A few months later, we had no choice but to have our launch online¹ because we were all living in lockdown, an unimaginable state of affairs in any other time. But I question here whether this is really a new era? Has Covid-19 broken time?

This essay is divided into three parts. In the first section, I draw on Helge Jordheim’s work on Reinhart Koselleck’s theory of temporality in relationship to the periodization of historical eras. If Covid-19 has inaugurated a new era, what do we lose or gain from declaring it so? In Part II, I reflect on what has happened to borders – our ongoing attempts to break space into units that (re)order and (re)organize the world into hierarchies – since the outbreak of Covid-19, not only the closures but also some of the surprising openings that have taken place. In the last section, I question whether the eradication of the virus in one locale is adequate. If it is thriving anywhere on this earth, are any of us safe even if we imagine that borders can remain sealed forever more. Shouldn’t a global pandemic require a global response?

Should we allow the coronavirus crisis to break time?

One of the consequences of all the border closings we have witnessed in the months since the outbreak of Covid-19 is that many prognosticators have declared post-Cold War globalization dead and buried (see Gindin 2020 for some examples). Instead of debating the veracity of this statement and whether the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall actually marked a new era of unfettered global capitalism many equated with ‘open’ borders – globalization never resembled the chimera of a ‘borderless’ global village but actually depends on border restrictions to regulate and manage the uneven development central to capitalism (see also Mezzadra and Nielsen 2013) – I would like us to reflect more philosophically and assiduously on the very dangerous trend in vogue right now: the tendency to use the coronavirus crisis to break time, to declare one era dead and another just beginning by inserting a temporal border between the two. This natural pandemic that stems from the non-human, unlike human-created un-

natural borders, is being used to create a temporal disjuncture in human history.

The narrativization of the coronavirus crisis has been beset from its earliest days by an historical amnesia and a depressing lack of intellectual rigor. Commentators and political actors from across the spectrum narrativize the coronavirus pandemic as a ‘temporal break’ – as in the hundreds of hyperbolic headlines and breathless pronouncements that the world will never be the same again, this is a black swan event, this is the new normal, the new world order etc. I would counsel profound caution here. Narrating this crisis as a temporal break between a before and after accomplishes ideological agendas for both the left and right. It is not only hubristic, for thousands of years humankind has faced plagues and epidemics, it also allows people with a myriad of motives to take advantage of the current moment to further their respective political agendas: climate-change activists think this will be the time when everyone realizes the necessity of a Green New Deal; anti-globalization nationalists view this as the instance when they can close borders to migrants and refugees forever more. Those in favor of surveillance can use this ‘break’ or new era to push for increased surveillance like track and trace programs in which an infected person’s contacts are identified. They claim this is in principle for the public good of monitoring ‘outbreaks’ and ‘clusters’. However, we should not rush to accept that this is an actual break in time – if such a thing even exists – without ruminating upon the stakes and long-term consequences.

The dangers and the historical deception involved in declaring a temporal break are defined well in Helge Jordheim’s work on German historiographer Reinhart Koselleck, who had very sophisticated notions of time and periodization. Jordheim argues that Koselleck has been misunderstood. Whereas he has been viewed as advocating a form of conceptual history that relies on and reduces chronological time to a linear progression sliced and diced by ‘clean’ periodic breaks, Jordheim draws together different threads that run through Koselleck’s oeuvre to assert that his theory of multiple temporalities is quite the opposite:

Koselleck’s theory of historical times is *not* a theory of periodization except in a very superficial sense. Regarded as a whole, what Koselleck has to offer is a radically different theory of overlaying temporal structures and layers [...] that defy periodization and [...] is even constructed with *the purpose* of defying periodization, at least in the traditional historiographical sense. In the context of this theory of multiple temporalities the logic of periodization, in terms of a chronological succession of more or less well-defined units of time, can only be one of many different temporal experiences, structures, and layers at work at any moment in history – more or less decisive, depending on the subject and material in question. (Jordheim 2012, 157; emphasis in the original)

Although the history of modernity is often portrayed as a radical rupture from a very different ‘traditional’ past, a new era characterized by discontinuity and disjuncture, Koselleck’s phenomenological evocation of times – not a singular time – depends on continuities and a palimpsestic present (see also Mezzadra 2007). Think of the ideological work that is achieved by declaring a temporal break like 9/11, for example, or 9 November 1989, when the Berlin Wall fell. These breaks allow us to proceed as if there is no before when of course, there are

many continuities with the previous epochs and the reasons for the 9/11 attacks and the fall of the Berlin Wall can only be grasped by wrestling with the messy forces of histories and politics both immediately prior to these events and their roots in times decades or centuries earlier.

When we declare Covid-19 capable of breaking time into a before and an after – a new era in which the coronavirus has suddenly come upon us and we discover that the world is very unequal or that democracy is practically non-existent or that many people's finances are extremely precarious or that there are a lot of borders – we fall into the trap of flattening a multiplicitous and enormously diverse experience of several strands of clashing and incoherent historical trajectories. Jordheim outlines Koselleck's more sophisticated and nuanced concept of temporality and indeed temporalities which defy neat bundlings:

Koselleck developed his theory of multiple temporalities, organized in the form of temporal layers that have different origins and duration and move at different speeds, as an alternative to the linear and empty time of periodization. Thus the fact that historical time is not linear and homogeneous but complex and multilayered accounts for the utility of all efforts to freeze history in order to delimit and define breaks, discontinuities, time spans, beginnings, and endings. Indeed, it accounts for the futility of periodization itself. (Jordheim 2012, 170)

Are we in a temporal break? Has Covid-19 broken time?

I would say it is too soon to decide or declare that, because we have to consider what came before and what is still (be)coming. The Coronavirus-induced lockdowns have been depicted as paralysis, as stopping time, as the type of slowing down ostensibly antithetical to modernity and to the incessant circulations inherent in the workings of global capitalism. But coronavirus-induced lockdowns and shutdowns have also inaugurated some instances of 'shock mobility' as citizens struggled to cross international borders to return to their countries of citizenship (see Xiang 2020). Millions of internal immigrants in India left the big cities to return to their home villages as the economic standstill left them homeless and wageless (see Samaddar 2020). Even the economic standstill was not so static for internet businesses like online retailer Amazon, which has become even more wealthy and powerful during Coronavirus. Multiple temporalities allow us to account for all these varying dichotomies of mobility and immobility, static and dynamic, closed yet still open to citizens (and often permanent residents, work permit-holders, their partners and children) borders.

If we were to choose but one epistemic vantage point as Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) did before, that of the border, we would see that in at least the thirty years prior to this, we were already seeing harder and harder borders arising everywhere. What is important to remember is that the steroidal border-thinking we are witnessing now is the continuation and intensification of a trend scholars had already identified at the end of 2019 (see examples cited in Myambo and Frassinelli 2019). On the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 2019, there were more borders than ever before. Not only were there more borders than ever before but xenophobia was on the rise around the world.

Although Coronavirus and, more specifically, the government and state responses to it, have shown us how fragile democracy is, that too is part of a trend we were already witnessing in the last decades: right-wing authoritarian leaders are now using this crisis to accrue even more power, the most infamous example being Viktor Orbán in Hungary who can now rule by decree. (Ethno)nationalism, racism, white supremacy, isolationism, populism, protectionism, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism and religious fundamentalism, which were all increasing already are going to increase even more. In that sense, we are seeing a continuation and exacerbation. Now we have several more examples of xenophobia: everyone is blaming the Other for Covid-19. The US president Donald Trump, who is one of the most ardent traffickers in white supremacy, racism and xenophobia, keeps referring to the ‘Chinese/Wuhan’ virus or, more recently, the ‘Kung flu’. Chinese and Asian people are suffering xenophobia in many countries but, meanwhile, the Chinese in China are victimizing African migrants as carriers of Covid-19. In India, Hindu nationalists are blaming Muslims. Scapegoating is part and parcel of many nations’ virus response and is inherently related to the question of globalization’s future amidst closed borders.

Our contemporary, pre-Covid-19 and during Covid-19, preoccupation with borders and walls is also the result of the ‘deglobalization’ of the last years. Defined as a reactionary rejection of multiculturalism, migration and diversity as well as the multilateralism that characterized the post-Cold War moment, deglobalization is depicted as the backlash against globalization symbolized by Brexit and Trump’s nativist border wall (see for example Donnan and Leatherby 2019; Gindin 2020). Significantly, it is *also* a protest against the mobility of (finance) capital and the type of ‘free trade’ favored by big business that often harms working-class communities in the industrialized world. Ironically, deglobalization is also a global phenomenon so when we see prognosticators prognosticating that the coronavirus pandemic is supposed to be the end of globalization, e.g. international supply chains for the production of medicine will change, the destruction of air travel and tourism etc., this pandemic has reminded us more than ever how interconnected and interdependent we are. Almost every single country is affected by the virus and there is a global competition to develop a vaccine and to acquire PPE (personal protective equipment), testing reagent and so on.

In this moment in which global comparison comes more easily to us than ever before, countries are trying to learn from each other about best practices for battling the infection’s transmission rate which keep R-naught under 1. More than ever before, coronavirus is a global media event – the global middle classes with reliable broadband are all watching *Tiger King* on Netflix and playing *Animal Crossing* in between baking sourdough bread. The global consciousness around the disease and the eerie similarity of lockdown policies around the world mean that many millions of people have comparable experiences. So even if coronavirus leads to some more deglobalization (nations’ manufacturing their own PPE, testing kits and medications), we will all be deglobalizing at the same time which means it will still be a global

phenomenon, if it does happen.

Because we know so little about this virus or its trajectory – here, I am referring to all of us including the scientific community of virologists, immunologists, epidemiologists – we should all be cautious about making declarative statements. We finished our introduction to the special issue on borders and globalization with the question, ‘Who the hell knows what will happen next?’ (Myambo and Frassinelli 2019, 298) and I will finish here with a variation on the same question: “Does anyone dare pretend they know what the hell will happen next?”

To put it colloquially, this has been the craziest time in which previously unimaginable, science fiction-type scenarios now unfold daily as masked figures, some wearing transparent plastic shields and latex gloves, are to be seen hither and thither, not just in hospitals’ intensive care units. However, the world did eventually recover from other pandemics like the Black Plague and the Spanish flu and did regain a sense of normalcy.

During the second century C.E., the Roman Empire was decimated by the Antonine Plague. At one point in the year 189, the city of Rome, much smaller than it is today, was losing 2,000 people a day to the plague (Watts 2020). Even the then emperor, Marcus Aurelius, is suspected of dying from what we believe today to have been smallpox. As a point of comparison, when Rome reported the highest ever number of new confirmed cases of Covid-19 to date, on 22 August 2020, the number stood at 215 but it made international news. These were not fatalities but just the number of people testing positive, many of whom were asymptomatic young people returning from holiday.

Until we are through this plague, it is well-nigh impossible to draw definitive conclusions. It is simply too early to say how much Covid-19 will break time and ultimately define a new era because there are so many currents of historical import at play, running at different speeds and rhythms:

By necessity, historiographical efforts to identify, delimit, and define a particular historical time span equipped with a beginning and, in some cases, an end, are able to account for only some of these [multiple temporal] layers, whereas others move at a different speed and have a different rhythm and will evade the attempts to reassemble and channel them into a relatively stable and homogeneous historical period. (Jordheim 2012, 171)

Placing a border between the pre- and during and maybe one day post-Coronavirus world would be an unnatural action, especially at this temporal juncture when the disease and our responses to it are moving both at warp speed and surprisingly slowly.

Covid-19’s ironic border tales: breaking space?

The arch-Brexiteers who advocated for the UK to withdraw from the EU for years and waged their Brexit campaign with the slogan of ‘taking back control’ of the country’s borders did not, like so many other countries, close their borders in the early days of the pandemic. As so many countries around the globe shut their borders to non-citizens, the UK never did so even when

the government(s) implemented lockdown(s) (Brown 2020). Ironically, during their slightly different lockdowns, the borders between Wales, Scotland and England hardened and border-crossings were forbidden whilst Heathrow Airport remained open to the world.² Travellers arriving into the UK did not even have to quarantine for 14 days upon entry until 8 June 2020 (Alcock 2020), when the Tory-led government bowed to huge political pressure and finally implemented this policy change as a temporary measure to be reviewed as the situation evolves.

The Brexiteers who fought for Brexit always did say that they believed in a ‘global Britain’ (see Harrois 2018) and although observers like myself view Brexit as one of the ultimate examples of deglobalization spurred on by nationalism, nativism and a significant dose of imperial nostalgia, perhaps Britain’s open borders during the pandemic signal a different future for the island nation?

Furthermore, in the wake of China’s new security law delimiting Hong Kong’s autonomy, the UK government has also offered three million Hong Kong residents the opportunity to relocate to Britain and ultimately become British citizens. If those fleeing Hong Kong, a former British colony, do move to the UK, voters who voted for Brexit to stem migration from the EU – the much maligned ‘freedom of movement’ – may find that there are more migrants than ever before.

Meanwhile the EU, whose entire *raison d’être* is a borderless united region, kept most of its internal borders shut for three months from mid-March to mid-June (even the border between Luxembourg and Germany was closed until mid-May). At the time of writing, the EU’s external borders are still shut to all but fifteen select countries where Covid-19 cases are relatively low. However, although we have seen individual nation-states literally slamming shut their territorial borders, and on one hand the nation-state seems to be coalescing and unifying behind their closed borders, we simultaneously see how Covid-19 has splintered nations along a plethora of different borders: the nation is fracturing as borders between regions, provinces, states, counties, cities, towns and even neighborhoods are closed.³ Sometimes they are opened and then closed again. The aim is to exclude possibly infectious outsiders and keep the people on the inside safe as we create new borders, metaphorical and literal, with the perpetual talk of ‘epicentres’, ‘clusters’ and ‘hotspots’.

But of course, all this closing of borders has already proven to be a feel-good fallacy as the virus is everywhere, those on the inside and outside are infected, so we should view this border-thinking as a simplification meant to apportion responsibility and reduce accountability for local, regional, and national governance structures. Everywhere, Covid-19 has laid bare the inequities central to each society’s internal striations, but will it ultimately smash the space of the global if these seemingly infinite borders continue to proliferate?

As already stated, post-Cold War globalization is predicated on capitalist uneven development which has always already been a project facilitated by border regimes (cf. Georgi

2019). The examples of border restrictions and closings above are ironic because they simultaneously foster new openings. We may still have more to learn from history. After whole regions of the Roman Empire were ravaged by the Antonine Plague, Marcus Aurelius invited migrants from outside the Empire's borders to come and repopulate them. Considering this reality, I ask in the final section of this essay why we are still relying on the myth of closed borders to control a global pandemic?

The global response is MIA. But we still need one

As is abundantly obvious by now, neither of the world's two superpowers, China and the US, or even bodies like the EU, or organizations like the beleaguered WHO have managed to spearhead a cross-border, global response to what is quite rightly described as a global pandemic. If the disease is not under control everywhere, it is not under control anywhere.

In order to confront this pandemic, ideally every country would have to simultaneously enact the same policies for a designated period of time. We need a unified strategy not just on the national level but on the global level. If the virus is wiped out in one county or state or province or country, it will rage on in other areas and eventually reinfect 'cured' zones. All borders, even the most tightly-controlled, remain penetrable. No wall is high enough to stop a virus. Until such time as a vaccine is developed, the *only* policy for tackling this virus appears to be spatial behavioural change: 'social distancing', masks as a somewhat efficacious physical barrier and the blunt public health tool of shutdowns or lockdowns to literally stop people from interacting as much as possible with those outside their immediate household. Therefore, until all countries follow the same lockdown policies – simultaneously – the virus will continue to spread.

A global lockdown would be extremely painful, for the global economy but more importantly, for humanity at large. However, we have now come to understand that we are only as safe as our most vulnerable neighbor. If the homeless woman on the street contracts Covid-19 and does not have access to healthcare, you can be sure that sooner or later, the resident in the gated community will also be exposed. The same logic works in the global context too.

The US shares porous borders with Canada and Mexico. Mexico has a porous border with Guatemala and Guatemala has a porous border with Honduras and so on and so forth. Therefore, in the long-term, the virus anywhere is a danger everywhere. If Germany reduces its fatality count, how long can it do so if the Netherlands' is still rising? If South Africa gets the disease under control but its bordering countries like Zimbabwe and Mozambique do not, will their efforts have been in vain? This question can be asked of every country and every region.

It might be possible to shut borders for a time but can borders be closed indefinitely? And where do you stop with drawing borders? Will the US introduce border controls between states with high infection rates and those that do not yet have as many confirmed cases? Will New York City be bordered off from the rest of New York state? Or will there be a border

between Brooklyn and Queens? Will there be checkpoints at borough borders to prevent movement from one to the other or even between adjacent neighborhoods in the same city?

This is neither desirable nor realistic. A global pandemic requires not the shutting of borders but cross-border efforts to address the disease's wildfire spread. However, who would spearhead such a global effort? Normally, one would expect the so-called 'leader of the free world' to step into the role. However, the US president, Donald Trump, has allowed his misguided obsession with borders and walls to undermine his administration's response to the virus with catastrophic results. At first, he declared the virus a 'Democratic hoax' and insisted on several occasions that it would magically disappear on its own. But simultaneously, this fanciful approach to the virus was belied by his administration's policy decisions which have seen them close the borders with Canada and Mexico, ban some travellers from China, the EU, the UK and Ireland, suspend the processing of immigrant visas and deny even more asylum-seekers entry.

Trump has famously not only abdicated his responsibility to lead globally but even nationally. He came to power with his America First rhetoric but Trump cannot even enact a US-wide policy to address the pandemic. Instead, what has emerged in the vacuum of competent national leadership from the federal government is a patchwork of policies introduced by governors and mayors at the state and city-level. Although Trump cannot lead a global response effort, the Trump administration has also worked hard to undermine multi-lateral and international institutions which might have done so. His administration withdrew funding from the WHO and Trump and his acolytes have constantly denigrated NATO and the United Nations. He and his administration have spurned America's traditional allies and pushed for isolationism.

Yet, he has failed to isolate the US from coronavirus which has led the world case count and death rate for much of 2020. In the vacuum of global leadership left by the US, China has partially filled the void but although China's economic strength can rival that of the US, it still does not have the requisite soft power to coordinate a global response. A global supply chain will be necessary for the production and distribution of life-saving ventilators, testing kits, PPE for frontline workers and a vaccine should one be developed. Science too cannot stop at a national border. Global cooperation is crucial to developing a vaccine and the data from everywhere is invaluable to all people.

Who will lead the way? Or will we allow Covid-19 to smash the time and space of the global into a million smaller and smaller smithereens in which we can only think and feel for those inside the increasingly small localities in which we enclose ourselves?

That depends on what we choose to believe about the efficacy of unnatural borders during a man-made crisis.

Concluding questions

This essay consists of schematic notes in which I try to escape my lockdown-induced brain paralysis to reflect on how borders – temporal, spatial, and those demarcating and crisscrossing what we have come to know as the space of the global – will impose their traces on these troubled times. I posit here that the delineation of a Covid-19 era is more hubris and ideological sleight of hand than reality. Borders of all types have been increasing for decades. The putative space of the global – as a political and economic entity – has always been organized hierarchically by a plethora of boundaries, frontiers and borders under the conditions of uneven development that is capitalism’s *modus operandi*. More borders, or even harder ones, cannot as of now break the time and space of the global.

Notes

¹ Some of the online launch is available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ReOnmKOML2s>.

² The British-based *Financial Times* which is notoriously anti-Brexit and favors borders open to the EU ran this headline on 16 April 2020: “Britain’s open borders make it a global outlier in coronavirus fight.” The article criticized the government for allowing up to 15,000 passengers a day to arrive at Heathrow who were neither tested nor asked to quarantine.

³ At the time of revising this essay, I came across this headline in a British newspaper as the English government reinstated some hyper-localized lockdown measures: “Streets apart! The road split by lockdown with one side in Birmingham – the other in Walsall” (Young 2020). Birmingham was put under lockdown while Walsall, which began on the opposite side of the street, was not.

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The pandemic of racial capitalism: another world is possible

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ABSTRACT

As the world grapples with the rising Covid-related death tolls, the recent deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Rayshard Brooks in the US and Collins Khosa and Petrus Miggels in South Africa have re-ignited the flames of indignation felt by Black and Brown peoples all over the world (A. Taylor 2020). These cases and countless others reveal the anti-people logic of the neoliberal state, dictating the daily operations of the US and its crony counterparts like Brazil. While the US government struggles with the nearly insurmountable difficulties presented by its grossly underfunded profit-driven healthcare system and its exceptionally inadequate ability (or willingness) to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic, it becomes abundantly clear that while Corona is a virus of pandemic proportions, the true pandemic is racial Capitalism. The crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic has the potential to be exploited by neoliberal regimes in order to perpetuate suffering for the majority of people and accumulation of wealth for the few; or, it has the potential to inspire a radical socio-economic shift across the globe, which could lead to an improved quality of life for the underprivileged and the poor. By considering the neoliberal logics undergirding technologies of the disposability of life at play in the handling of Covid-19 in the US alongside the socialist logics of the preservation of life at play in the cases of Venezuela and Cuba, we can begin to see the ways in which an entirely different conception of the global order is possible. This article uses the Covid-19 crisis to expose the deadly anti-Blackness of the neoliberal socio-economic logic and suggests that another world is indeed possible if we can learn from the current crisis.

Keywords

Covid-19, racial capitalism, socialism, alternative futures, neoliberalism

Only a crisis – actual or perceived – produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes the politically inevitable.

Milton Friedman

It is not without hesitation that I begin this essay with the words of a man whose theories of “economic liberalism” were used to usher in an era of rampant neoliberal reforms which sustained coups against populist regimes in Chile and Argentina and almost single-handedly led the effort to privatize New Orleanian public schools in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Friedman’s quote provides critical context for the development of what he called economic “shock treatment,” and what Naomi Klein’s *The Shock Doctrine* subsequently exposed as a

“fundamentalist form of capitalism [which] has always needed disasters to advance” (Klein 2007, 7-9). In heeding the great Black feminist Intellectual Audre Lorde’s forewarning that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house,” (Lorde 2018) we also should not allow the master’s logics to dictate the possible futures we envision. The crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic, as exploited by neoliberal regimes, perpetuates suffering for the common people, while the wealthy few, like Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, become richer than ever. Despite the havoc it continues to wreak, the pandemic also has the potential to inspire a radical socio-economic shift across the globe, which could lead to better life quality for most of the world’s population. This article attempts to turn the above quote by Friedman on its head, by using the Covid-19 crisis to expose the deadliness of neoliberal socio-economic logic, and point to places to watch as we envision alternative futures.

When I first discovered, in the summer of 2019, that I had been awarded a writing fellowship in Johannesburg to begin in February 2020, the world had no idea that we would be approaching the end of life as we have come to know it. In recent years I have developed a deep fascination with apocalyptic genres of film and literature, including dystopian fantasies like the Hunger Games, The Children of Men, and The Handmaid’s Tale; zombie apocalypses like The Walking Dead, World War Z, and 28 Days Later; and disaster films like Contagion, Twister, and San Andreas. No doubt, some of these films and novels leave much to be desired; however, what I find most interesting about these particular genres are their meditations on the human condition. Each of these offers some version of what the authors and their co-creators envision human beings will return/devolve to when the end of the world (as we know it) arrives. What is more, these fictional accounts eschew renderings of the apocalypse as the “end of days” on earth and speak more to the etymology of the word as a “revelation,” an “unveiling” or an unfolding of things previously unknown, though not necessarily new. As the world grapples with the rising Covid-related death toll, the recent deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Rayshard Brooks in the US, and of Collins Khosa and Petrus Miggels in South Africa, have re-ignited the flames of indignation felt by Black and Brown peoples all over the world (A. Taylor 2020). The manner of death and subsequent handling of these cases and countless others reveal the anti-people logic of the neoliberal state, dictating the daily operations of the US and its crony countries, specifically Brazil, whose police killings have increased during the pandemic and disproportionately target Afro-Brazilians (Acayaba and Arcoverde, 2020). While the US government struggles with the nearly insurmountable difficulties presented by its profit-driven healthcare system, coupled with its gross lack of willingness to take the pandemic seriously, it becomes abundantly clear that while Corona is a virus of pandemic proportions, the true pandemic is racial Capitalism.

Drawing on Oliver Cromwell Cox’s description of the United States as the “lusty child of an already highly developed capitalism” (Cox 1962, 3-4), Charisse Burden-Stelly’s articulation of racial capitalism notes that one of the many techniques deployed and perfected by the US

in its pursuit of accumulated wealth was its “lack of concern for the political and economic welfare of the overwhelming masses of its population, least of all the descendants of the enslaved” (Burden-Stelly 2020). In this sense, the pandemic of racial capitalism as it manifests through Covid-19 is truly apocalyptic. If we take, as a point of comparison, the neoliberal logics of the disposability of life at play in the handling of Covid-19 in the US alongside the communal logics undergirding socialist projects which attempt to preserve life in Venezuela and Cuba, for example, we might have a better understanding of the multiple worlds that exist and perhaps find ways of being that are much more conducive to the conditions of life. More importantly, we might begin to see the ways in which an entirely different conception of a global order is possible, even if flawed. The Covid pandemic has forced several contradictions to the surface where world-order conceptions are concerned, particularly as regards to which communities are deemed expendable and who ‘the state’ believes needs to be regulated and controlled. “Racism and capitalism mutually construct harmful social conditions that fundamentally shape Covid-19 disease” and social inequities (Laster Pirtle 2020, 504). In light of this, I will focus my attention on those countries with alternative visions of a socialist-oriented future.

On Monday, 23 March 2020, with just 77 confirmed Covid-19 cases, Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro announced a series of measures to prevent a catastrophic loss of life in the country. These measures included a six-month suspension on commercial and residential rents, as well as capital and loan interest payments; public and private sector workers were guaranteed a special government bonus; job dismissals as a result of quarantine were outlawed; a special agricultural plan to ensure the contents of the Local Food Production and Provision Committees (CLAP) food boxes would be available to over seven million families, and telecommunication companies were barred from cutting customers services for six months. President Maduro concluded his public announcement by assuring the Venezuelan people that he would use “all his power and consciousness to protect jobs” and the most vulnerable people during the lockdown (Dobson 2020). Cuba, on the other hand, was busy sending teams of medical doctors to foreign countries, such as Italy and South Africa, as part of its long-standing global medical diplomacy program, which was developed and realized as a project of the Cuban Revolution. As Cuba and Venezuela worked to help contain the virus at home and abroad, the US government was busy covertly orchestrating multiple coup attempts (Trevithick 2020; Blumenthal and Cohen 2019). Cuba and Venezuela represent the two countries in the Western hemisphere with the longest standing national experimentation with socialist political governance. They also happen to be among the countries in the hemisphere with the most promising Covid-19 containment programs thus far.

On the opposite end of the political spectrum, Venezuela’s southern neighbor Brazil, under Jair Bolsonaro, and the US under the leadership of Donald Trump have consistently ranked in the top three Covid-19 hotspots globally. During the first two weeks of June, Brazil and the USA continued to ease lockdown restrictions despite recording some of the highest

rates of virus contraction and death since the pandemic began. Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro reportedly referred to the coronavirus as a “little flu” in March and later declared that he was “sorry for all the dead, but that’s everyone’s destiny” (Bolsonaro 2020). At the same time that Venezuela was implementing laws and policies to ensure the lives and livelihoods of its citizens over the first six months of the pandemic, Donald Trump, after reluctantly advising citizens to stay home, was already contemplating reopening the country for business in late March. Trump’s party mate, Texas Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick, sent a letter to Fox News anchor Tucker Carlson saying the following:

I think there are lots of grandparents who would agree with me that I want my grandchildren to live in the America I did [...] I want them to have a shot at the American dream. But right now, this virus, which all the experts say that 98% of all people will survive [...] is killing our country in another way [...] could bring about a total economic collapse and potentially a collapse of our society. [...] So, I say let’s give this a few more days or weeks but after that let’s go back to work and go back to living (Patrick 2020).

In a 23 March Fox News interview with Tucker Carlson, in response to that letter Patrick further asserted:

Tucker, no one reached out to me and said, “As a senior citizen, are you willing to take a chance on your survival in exchange for keeping the America that all America loves for your children and grandchildren?” And if that’s the exchange, I’m all in. [...] I just think there are lots of grandparents out there in this country like me, I have six grandchildren, that what we all care about and what we love more than anything are those children. And I want to live smart and see through this, but I don’t want the whole country to be sacrificed. And that’s what I see (Patrick 2020).

Patrick’s comments expose the logic underpinning the vast majority of governmental decisions made in response to the growing pandemic, that capital is more important than life. As the world was just beginning to understand how the virus operated and which demographics were most likely to contract the virus, much of the national and international dialogue centered around the notion that the young and the relatively healthy were at low risk of dying from the disease. Many (particularly those on the right) went so far as to suggest that ‘herd immunity’ was the best way to handle the virus until a vaccine was developed (Limbaugh 2020; McKay 2020), a heavily disputed claim (Dowdy and D’Souza 2020). One of the many problems with this logic is that it would require exposing our elderly and sick, two populations already deemed expendable by capitalist logic, to a virus that has no cure, condemning them to almost certain death. In response to the absurd notion that a certain percentage of the population is expendable, Bree Newsome Bass tweeted on 24 March 2020 that “everyone arguing that 1-2% of the population dying isn’t a big deal need to identify 1 or 2 close family members or friends they are willing to offer up to death at the moment for capitalism. Name them” (Newsome Bass 2020a). In a follow-up tweet, she further demanded: “Say their names out loud and speak it into the universe with the same ease you condemn others to death” (Newsome Bass 2020b). At the time of drafting this essay, this tweet had been liked more

than 150,00 times and had been retweeted over 40,000 times. Fortunately, the argument that a sizeable portion of the population should willingly sacrifice their selves is losing traction at the moment; however, the fact that it ever had any should be of great concern to us all.

Of even greater concern is the latest revelation that, according to Bob Woodward's new book on Donald Trump, Trump was fully aware of the possibility of catastrophic loss of life but decided to play the danger down in order to avoid national panic (Kenny 2020). Much has been made of the specificities of Donald Trump's mishandling of the Covid-19 Pandemic in the United States. However, this characterization of the havoc wrought by the virus on the American public places too much of the blame on Trump's gross incompetence and ignores the historical continuities of the neoliberal logic at play. Mike Davis explains the long "stop-and-go cycle" of pandemic preparedness that facilitated our present state of disaster (Davis 2020, 21). Davis explains that in 1998 the Clinton administration created a National Pharmaceutical Stockpile under CDC management expressly to deal with the pandemic threat. In 2003 the Bush Administration changed the name to the National Strategic Stockpile and handed control over to Homeland Security. At that point, there were 105 million N-95 respirators in the stockpile. In 2009 Obama distributed 100 million of those masks during the H1N1 emergency, but rather than using public funds to replenish the stockpile for the public good, Obama argued: "that a better and cheaper solution was to help the private sector develop the production capacity to meet surging demand in a pandemic crisis" (Davis 2020, 22). The notion that such a public and far-reaching concern like pandemic preparedness should be left to private sector interests demonstrates a logic that values profit over life, one that cannot be read as the singular folly of the Trump administration. Most significantly, the reasoning undergirding these narratives and ultimately policy decisions call our attention to the logic of disposability driving the technologies of death under global racial capitalism.

In his *Twenty Theses on Politics* Enrique Dussel, drawing on the work of Rousseau, offers an understanding of politics beyond the logic of domination. Dussel suggests that politics should be understood as "an activity that organizes and promotes the production, reproduction, and enhancement of the lives of the members of that community" (Dussel 2008, 14). There is no denying the dire economic straits the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela finds itself in now, particularly after the price of oil on the global market dropped precipitously. Since the election of President Hugo Chavez in 1998, the Bolivarian Revolution has been a beacon of hope for globally dispossessed peoples, who saw in the revolution a 21st-century alternative to neoliberal racial capitalism (Piitso 2020). Over the past two decades or more, despite its vast imperfections, the Bolivarian government, in cooperation with its poor, Black, and Brown citizens, has demonstrated an overwhelming concern with a "will-to-live" or "the fundamental material determination of the definition of political power" (Dussel 2008, 14). The US and Brazil's (among others) lack of concern for life and preoccupation with capital exhibits a neoliberal technology of disposability through structural anti-Blackness, in particular, discrimi-

natory legislation in housing, employment, and police practices which maintain and reinscribe inequality. Conversely, Venezuela, and Cuba's experimentation with socialism at the level of the state demonstrate a logic that lends itself to the preservation of life over capital. Could it possibly be that Covid-19 is the critical turning point in the demise of Capitalism that Marx predicted so long ago? This question and the present reality necessitate that we consider what the spread and varied global successes of containing the virus show us about the value of life in Capitalist vs. Socialist societies.

Hurricane Corona

Since the beginning of the Coronavirus outbreak, I have had the fortune of being 'locked down' at the Johannesburg Institute for Advanced Study among a community of writers and scholars. Observing the spread of the pandemic so far from my home in the United States, I have witnessed the cruelty of anti-Blackness and its disproportionate impact on poor Black communities all over the world. The disparate racialized impact of Covid-19 in conjunction with state repression and police violence against Black bodies is a manifestation of what Foucault theorized as biopower or a form of racism which is "bound up with the workings of the state that is obliged to use race, the elimination of races and the purification of the race, to exercise sovereign power" (Foucault 1997, 258). Covid-19 initially entered South Africa through the bodies of wealthy white travelers returning from Italy. Early on, the virus was even referred to as a disease of "white globe trotters" (Everatt 2020). For the first few months, the Western Cape (the province with the highest percentage of white South Africans) was the virus hotspot. There were even early discussions across social media platforms that Black people were immune to the virus (Watson 2020). In South Africa, these myths were fueled by the reality that the earliest public cases of the virus (outside of China) were in predominantly white nations and the virus took longer to spread on the African continent. As the South African government eased the lockdown in an attempt to allow the economy to rebound, the virus found new strength among the most vulnerable, the poor Black population of the country.

The Coronavirus, much like Hurricane Katrina, reveals the myriad ways in which race/class/inequality/oppression are endemic to American society specifically, and racist, neo-liberal capitalist structures of governance more generally. The unrelenting state-sanctioned violence visited upon Black people in the US, coupled with the Trump administration's gross mishandling of the Covid-19 pandemic, reveal a "biopolitical agenda in which the logic of disposability and the politics of death are largely structured around race and class inequality" (Giroux 2006, 181). When Katrina made landfall, the US as a nation witnessed "the collapse of one of society's most basic covenants – to care for the helpless – [which] suggests that the elderly and critically ill plummeted to the bottom of the priority lists as calamity engulfed New Orleans" (Abelson and Rohde 2005). The Coronavirus pandemic is a painful reminder of this broken covenant, only this time the calamity has reached global proportions. In the wake of

Katrina, there were frequent characterizations of New Orleans as a Third World Refugee Camp. Henry Giroux has argued that the Black bodies left floating in the wake of Hurricane Katrina “laid bare the racial and class fault lines that mark an increasingly damaged and withering democracy” and “revealed the emergence of a new kind of politics, one in which an entire population are now considered disposable” (Giroux 2006, 174): Covid-19 is the latest in that saga of revelations.

My father, a 65-year-old construction worker in the USA, is currently faced with a decision, all too familiar to the masses of poor Black and Brown citizens, to choose between life or livelihood, as if one can be chosen without the other. Unlike Venezuela, the US has made no blanket guarantees of sustained livelihoods amid the pandemic. The poor must choose to take their chances of contracting the virus despite wholly inadequate healthcare or protect themselves from the virus by staying home. Yet, staying home is not the simple decision it appears to be, staying home for most means forfeiting employment, which results in a lack of income and an inability to provide for oneself and one’s family. In a recently published op-ed, Lynell Thomas described the connections between the vulnerabilities of poor Black communities in the wake of Katrina and the eye of Corona. She argues:

because of entrenched income and wealth inequality, housing and food insecurity, substandard healthcare and education, increased environmental vulnerability, and staggering levels of poverty, African Americans were more vulnerable to and less capable of surviving and recovering from Hurricane Katrina [...] As was the case with Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans has shone a spotlight on the economic, social, and moral costs of deep-seated race, class, and gender inequities. It’s going to take more than a vaccine to cure that disease. (Thomas 2020)

The anti-Black logic undergirding media depictions of Black people as looters and white people as resourceful survivors in the immediate aftermath of Katrina have surfaced once again through the recent preoccupations with so-called ‘looting’ and the destruction of property in the aftermath of the killings of Amahad Aubery, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Rayshard Brooks. Despite the astronomical number of Covid-19 related deaths, America’s poor, Black and Brown citizens found no relief from state violence during the lockdown. This chain of successive murders gave rise to the most widespread and sustained protests against racial violence the US has ever seen. On 12 June 2020, more than 1,600 demonstrations were reported in all 50 states and territories across the United States of America. In the wake of Katrina, Giroux theorized what he called the “new biopolitics of disposability,” which he explained as a logic that requires “the poor, especially people of color, not only have to fend for themselves but are supposed to do so without being seen by the dominant society” (Giroux 2006, 174). In many ways, the mass protests across the US must be read as a refusal of such invisibility. As poor Black and Brown bodies find themselves dying from Covid-19 at rates more than three times that of their white counterparts (Pilkington 2020) and being murdered by police at more than twice the rate of their white counterparts (Washington Post 2020), the so-called

'riots' must be understood fundamentally as a physical manifestation of a will to live, radical politics with revolutionary potential.

As the virus was first identified in the US, Bernie Sanders appeared to be a viable presidential candidate and, for the first time in US history, the word socialism found its way to the center of the national conversation about the direction the country should take in the coming years (KY Taylor 2020). At this point one can only wonder if the US would have handled the pandemic differently had Bernie Sanders remained in the race and continued to push a national dialogue that attempted to center US citizens rather than US capital. As November 2020 fast approaches it has become increasingly apparent that Trump will not concede a peaceful transition of power if he is not reelected (Crowley 2020). The potential fallout of Trump's refusal is of particular concern as the traditional flu season begins in the northern hemisphere and Covid infection rates are once again on the rise. However moderate, the popular support for Bernie Sanders campaign, however imperfect, represents a rebellion against the status quo in the US, so it should come as no surprise that the Democratic National Convention did everything within its power to ensure that Sanders would NOT become the Democratic Party's presidential nominee (Siders 2020). Despite the existing loyal opposition between the Democratic and Republican parties promoting only nominally distinct political agendas, hope lies in the quiet rebellion of the American people who envisioned (even if prematurely) an America that could 'lean in' to the radical potential of a budding socialism.

In 1866, just after the passage of the Civil Rights and Freedmen's Bureau Bills, Frederick Douglass penned a piece on Reconstruction for *the Atlantic*. "The thing worse than rebellion is the thing that causes rebellion. What that thing is, we have been taught to our cost. It remains now to be seen whether we have the needed courage to have that cause entirely removed from the Republic" (Douglass 1866). With these words, Douglass goes on to characterize rebellion as "invaluable" and "highly instructive" (Douglass 1866). Douglass maintained that we should even be thankful for rebellion because it is "an impressive teacher, though a stern and terrible one" (Douglass 1866). He went on to say that rebellion is "an instructor never a day before its time, for it comes only when all other means of enlightenment have failed" (Douglass 1866). Here Douglass challenges our readings of rebellions (i.e. riots) as spontaneous uprisings, seeing them as the last available means to draw attention to a pressing issue when all other tactics have failed. The global protests that have proliferated in the wake of these killings are no different. The imposition of physical lockdowns in an attempt to 'flatten the curve' of the virus may have provided the undivided attention needed to understand the pervasive and insidious nature of racial capitalism and its various manifestations. It cannot be a coincidence that the largest coordinated global demonstrations against racial capitalism occurred as countries began to lift lockdown measures. As the waves of hurricane corona ebb, poor Black and Brown people all over the world are flowing out of their homes, and into the streets determined to fight for their lives and their livelihood. What remains to be seen is

whether the strength of the rebellions will be able to weather the storm of the next wave.

Another world is possible

In the immediate aftermath of the triumph of the Cuban Revolution, Fidel Castro and his cabinet, based on the logic informing socialist beliefs that everyone has an equal right to life and dignity, poured significant amounts of government resources into universal healthcare and educational systems. Revolutionary Cuban internationalism is a product of their desire to counter the prevailing McCarthyian logic of the day and spread revolutionary socialist ideals to Africa, Latin America, and to the rest of the world. For more than six decades Cuban internationalism has been seen at play all over the world. The country is perhaps best known for its “medical diplomacy” programs, sending doctors all over the world, mostly to so-called “developing nations.” In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Cuba and Venezuela were among the first countries to offer assistance, even before the national, state, or local Louisiana governments. The US state department rejected these offers of assistance (Lake 2005). When, in 2010, Haiti was devastated by a massive earthquake and subsequent tremors, the US State Department, once again, attempted to block much-needed aid from Venezuela as well as other foreign aid while opting to send more than 6000 US troops to effectively enact a military occupation. Then Foreign Minister Nicolas Maduro reported that aid shipments to Haiti were being diverted via the neighbouring Dominican Republic to avoid restrictions imposed by the US at the Port-au-Prince airport. “Doctors Without Borders has also criticised the US’s prioritisation of military logistics over food and medical aid saying planes carrying urgently needed surgical equipment and drugs have been turned away five times, even though the agency received prior authorisation to land” (Janicke 2010). During that same period, thanks to Venezuelan owned CITGO Oil’s heating oil subsidy, thousands of American citizens received heating services for several brutal north-eastern winters (McDonald 2011). Whether Venezuela is attempting to drum up political support by offering aid is certainly a claim worth further exploration, the politically humane choice to offer such aid in the face of their own socio-economic and political uncertainty on the global oil market, without the imposition of a military occupation, evidences a socialist preservationist logic that is clearly not at play in USAID.

The Covid-19 pandemic has presented a unique and almost unprecedented opportunity for Cuba to enact its medical diplomacy all over the world, even in so-called ‘developed nations’ that have attempted to condemn the country to the status of a perpetual political pariah. In mid-March 2020 the British cruise ship Braemar had a least five individuals on board who tested positive for the novel Coronavirus. An additional twenty-two guests and twenty-one crew members were in isolation because they were experiencing “influenza-like symptoms” (Carrega and Raida 2020). After weeks of being stranded at sea because many Caribbean countries refused to allow them to dock for fear of spreading the virus, Cuba, out of humanitarian concern allowed the ship to dock at their Mariel Port. As part of what they understood to

be their responsibility in a global “shared effort to confront and stop the spread of the pandemic,” the Cuban government allowed the ship with approximately six hundred British nationals on board, to dock and begin the repatriation process (Carrega and Raida 2020). Later that same month, more than fifty Cuban doctors arrived in Italy’s worst affected region, Lombardy, to help fight the virus (teleSUR 2020). In late April more than two hundred Cuban doctors arrived in South Africa to help fight the virus (Magome 2020). Similar delegations were sent to Venezuela, Nicaragua, Jamaica, Suriname, and Grenada, to name a few. Despite the decades-long embargo imposed on Cuba by the United States and its neocolonial allies, Covid-19 has provided an opportunity for the Cuban government to demonstrate the moral imperative driving its support to life across the globe, even as the racial capitalist interests of the US attempt to starve the nation.

In neighboring Venezuela, after successive failed attempts to falsely impose Juan Guaidó as the (US declared) president of Venezuela since January 2019, the US, during a global pandemic, with the highest unemployment rates since the Great Depression era, and an epidemic of racialized state-sanctioned violence, issued a fifteen-million dollar reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro – who the US drug enforcement agency charged with narco-terrorism, corruption, and drug trafficking, among other criminal charges – and an additional thirty-five million for information on other top Venezuelan officials (United States Drug Enforcement Agency 2020). The funneling of money into efforts to destabilize the Venezuelan government while at the same time refusing to provide the necessary financial and sanitary assistance to its most vulnerable citizens back home clearly demonstrates the United States’ great lack of care and concern for human life. Despite the US’s unrelenting obsession and a severely damaged economy, Venezuela has attempted to manage the virus in a way that grants its citizens the most dignity possible. In June 2020, President Maduro participated in an online forum with the Education Minister and Vice President of Social and Territorial development in Venezuela, Aristóbulo Istúriz, and Roraima Gutiérrez, Secretary-General of the International Anti-Imperialist Cumbe of African and Afro-descendants, formed in November 2019. The forum featured a discussion about Afro-descendant responses to racism in the context of Covid-19. Maduro characterized the meeting as a “continuation of initiatives that we have undertaken to coordinate the fight of social movements for justice and against racism, colonialism, and oppression,” and he went on to express his solidarity with the victims of police brutality in the US and the family of George Floyd in particular (Torres 2020). He concluded by asserting that “the Venezuelan people have a lot of strength and conscience. They cannot keep us down. Our people are standing up. Venezuela shows its solidarity with the fight for equality, for a better and new society” (Torres 2020). Concerning Covid-19 more specifically, Maduro contrasted the situation in the United States and Brazil, where racism and economic interests take precedence over human lives, by calling attention to the fact that in Venezuela

nothing is charged to anyone. Tests have no charge. Nothing is charged to anyone from testing until they are discharged [...] more than 1.7 million tests have been done with an average of 35,781 tests per 1 million population [...] we have made huge efforts to detect coronavirus and provide our people with treatment (Torres 2020).

Gutiérrez declared:

united, we are a force, and the system knows it. We are not only united by racism as a problem taking place in the U.S., Europe, and many other parts of the world. You can see how the people of the Dominican Republic were recently repressed for protesting against racism. Starting from these reflections, we need to move forward to defend our right and the fundamental *right to life* (Torres 2020).¹

While far from utopias, Venezuela's and Cuba's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, as I have attempted to demonstrate, exhibit a combination of strategies, policies, and perhaps most importantly worldviews that promote the preservation of life over the accumulation of profit. Despite its self-conception as a world leader, the US has demonstrated everything but leadership amid this pandemic. It is my hope that this essay inspires a closer look at the projects underway in these two countries without the shroud of racial capitalist consumerist logic promoted by world powers like the US and its crony countries. The fundamental right to life is what is at stake in determining what the post-Covid-19 global order looks like. We can choose to continue with business as usual or we can choose to believe that another world is indeed possible.

Note

¹ Here Gutiérrez is referring to the arbitrary detention of Afro-Dominican activists Ana María Belique, Maribel Nuñez, and Fernando Corona in association with the 9 June 2020 George Floyd/Black Lives Matter demonstrations they led at Independence Park in the capital city of Santo Domingo.

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Keywords, again: provisional reflections from a situated perspective

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ABSTRACT

Covid-19 has abruptly broken into people's lives and has caused disease and death that, with uneven impact and consequences, have affected the living conditions and cultural behaviours of human societies worldwide. In the Global North, death has entered people's lives anew and invited a pause, a re-thinking about the precariousness of human existence and the (in)ability to deal with it, practically and emotionally. Facing this major event in the history of culture and society, the urge of a culturalist's analysis advises us to examine the output of thinking and argumentation through the interdisciplinary perspective of a conjunctural approach – as theorised by Stuart Hall and Lawrence Grossberg – which attempts to identify and interpret the multiple trajectories and forces that shape crisis and change in society. This article will observe the Covid-19 conversation through the lens of selected keywords. A crucial crossway in the tradition of cultural studies is how major changes in the relationship of culture and society have been interpreted through the emergence and/or revision of keywords. Building on this analytical stance, the article will focus on some keywords as a constellation of relations that, from a situated perspective, provide indications of current drives of change and of future challenges that have emerged during the spread of Covid-19. The topic of this article is indeed emergent and as yet under-theorised. Therefore, the discussion – as a starting point of a larger project – will develop into a conversation with a selection of materials that have most stimulated my interest and concern.

Keywords

cultural studies, immunity, freedom, racism, death, migrant labour, imagination

A conjunctural approach to Covid-19: situatedness, crisis and change

In a rather condensed span of time, the outbreak of Covid-19 has stimulated the substantial production of factual observations, reflections and debates, delivered through a multiplicity of channels and from a variety of perspectives, both for the general public and for specific and focused audiences. The debate has been active in a myriad of discursive arenas, and the central focus on Covid-19 has taken diverse inflections according to disciplinary interests and preoccupations. Printed publication and oral transmission have been surpassed by virtual forms of communication that have allowed the quick and up-to-date diffusion of information and considerations in many disciplinary fields and on specific subjects and concerns. E-books, blogs, podcasts, webinars and open access resources have granted unprecedented free access to online materials offered by publishers, cultural and educational institutions, international agencies, political bodies, associations, groups of activists and private individuals. An

examination of this rich articulation of ideas, however incomplete due to its extensiveness and continuous change, is worth pursuing in the attempt to identify which lines of thought may be helpful to orientate the debate towards the future and possibly to investigate the entangled and confused issues that the coronavirus has brought to the foreground.

Inevitably, this analysis proceeds from the situated perspective that the pandemic has helped to frame, at least in its practical constraints. In February 2020 I left Milan, where I work, due to the spread of Covid-19. Until the end of June, I was physically located in my hometown, close to the Adriatic coast in Northern Italy, and experienced lockdown with my family in a house in the countryside with outside space. The three of us were safe and kept our distance from the world around us, trying to have convivial meetings with our extended family and some friends via social networks. The isolation was emotionally and professionally distressing but manageable: my husband and I could work from home and our daughter attended university lessons online. It was a condition of privilege, which perhaps may not affect my understanding of the existence of different or less privileged situations, but which may hinder my capacity to comprehend them and share their intensity. This partial, brief description becomes relevant when considering the wider spectrum of the impact of Covid-19 worldwide: an angle of observation that places apparent oppositions in relation to one another, the private alongside the public, what is close by versus what is far away, what is specifically contextual set against a multiplicity of conjunctures.

Cultural Studies, an intellectual position and cultural project of political intervention developed on Gramscian key tenets in Stuart Hall's reflections (see Featherstone 2017), focuses on conjuncture as a way of interpreting crisis and change in precise historical moments. Stuart Hall defines a conjuncture as

a period during which the different social, political, economic and ideological contradictions that are at work in society come together to give it a specific and distinctive shape. [...] As I see it, history moves from one conjuncture to another rather than being an evolutionary flow. And what drives it forward is usually a crisis, when the contradictions that are always at play in any historical moment are condensed, or, as Althusser said, "fuse in a ruptural unity." (Hall and Massey 2014, 57)

The diffusion of Covid-19 may be interpreted as a conjuncture and may also be "constructed, narrated, fabricated" (Grossberg 2010, 41; 2017) as a moment of crisis. This crisis, it may be argued, predates the pandemic and is fundamentally political (Fraser 2019). Through the inscription of narratological elements, crisis storytelling emerges as a public construction, which is descriptive of a leading trajectory of the present conjuncture as well as a powerful instrument of signification to influence public opinion (De Michelis 2017). In opposition to the widespread diffusion of post-truth, a sharp focus on the essential function of keywords – as methodological tools that may help to identify multiple and conflicting lines of forces operating in the current conjuncture and that are articulated around the fundamental intersection of class, race and gender – seems useful and inspiring.

Lawrence Grossberg and other cultural studies scholars have kept the conversation alive with Stuart Hall's fundamental teaching about examining precise moments of crisis and change against the current configuration of events, relations and conditions, and his mandate to "map a social territory, in order to identify possible sites of political intervention" (Gilbert 2019, 15). Part of this active conversation has been recently published in *New Formations* (2019) and offers a useful theoretical and methodological paradigm for mapping the current Covid-19 condition following the ongoing project of cultural studies "as forms of intellectual experimentation" (Grossberg 2015, 225). Such experimental mapping of a conjuncture requires constant intellectual commitment in conversation with the others invested in the project: "The richer our efforts, the more maps we can construct and relate, the better our understanding of the conjuncture and our imagination of its possible transformations" (Grossberg 2015, 226). While the reference to imagination anticipates the final collaborative keyword of this essay, there are also different precise ideological orientations and pragmatic positions that need to be highlighted. As the following section on racism will try to illustrate, reactions to Covid-19 have manifested ideological polarisations and divides, both on the part of governments and institutions, and of the movements that have emerged in civil society.

Consistent with my approach, I wish to recall another important element in the tradition of cultural studies, that is how major changes in the relationship of culture and society have been identified through the emergence and revision of keywords, as Raymond Williams initiated in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976); as Lawrence Grossberg and others developed in *New Keywords* (2005) by stressing the arising phenomenon of human mobility, which the New Keywords Collective updated with a special focus on borders and migration (2015), and The Keywords Project contributed to expand (2018). Building on this analytical stance, I wish to focus on some keywords that, to my understanding and sensibility from a situated perspective, may provide indications of the changes that have taken place during the spread of the coronavirus. However, the analysis will not develop according to a vocabulary of single lemmas, as in cultural studies tradition, nor will it revise that tradition. Keywords will be used, instead, as interconnected perspectives allowing for a conjunctural approach to Covid-19 and will be presented in clusters that make their relations and concatenation explicit. These keywords are not new; they have been operating practically in society and latent in public discourse and in scholarly thinking for quite a while. Covid-19 has brought them to the foreground and laden them with meanings that may require new eyes and new lenses in order to make the forces at work visible (see Fraser 2019; "Renew Normal" 2020). Perhaps, and hopefully, the moment is now ripe to confront some substantial predicaments of the present time (see Bailey 2020), which an awareness of human precariousness and the manifest presence of death have forcefully brought to the forefront.

My intellectual training in postcolonial studies urges me to carefully consider uneven power relationships, dynamics of racial exclusion in social interactions, inequalities, exploita-

tion of subaltern groups, and imperial drives, as well as to maintain a perceptive position towards forms of dissent, resistance and political engagement. The contiguity of cultural studies and postcolonial studies allows for a wide-ranging perspective that, from the contextual analysis of specific moments in history (spatially and temporally defined) and from the excavation of unbalances of power and strategies of opposition, attempts to envision pragmatic actions in the present that may reverberate changes across other spaces and future temporalities (see Gualtieri 2019). Along this line, in order to frame my discussion within broadly interlaced disciplinary fields, let me begin with a few initiatives that attracted my attention – as they pertain to the humanities and social sciences – and point to a variety of matters and apprehensions during this pandemic. Of course, the topic under scrutiny in this article is quite new and under-theorised, therefore my presentation will develop, mainly, in the form of a survey and a conversation about part of the materials that have most stimulated my reasoning and feelings.

The everyday

The Department of Psychology of the American University of Paris organised the comprehensive ten-day virtual conference “Psychology of Global Crises: State Surveillance, Solidarity and Everyday Life,” in order to discuss, from a variety of critical angles, “the impact of past and current, global and local crises on everyday life” as sparked by recent developments. Major questions raised regarded the contribution of social sciences to understand the crisis; the voices which are heard; the diverse effects of the crisis and how individuals and communities are affected differently. Attention to everyday life is central in trying to understand the long-standing consequences of the present pandemic, as this focus dismantles the homogenising perception disseminated through globalisation by drawing attention to specific localisms, communities, movements and personal experiences. The person is explored as a microcosm that manifests the worries, dangers and challenges of the global pandemic on an individual scale. What emerges, among the range of themes and critical angles, is the evidence of personal affective reactions to the pandemic and its induced consequences.

A critical view of the everyday and of the restricted situated condition is useful to draw attention to the daily routine that has been upset by the advent of Covid-19 and the imposed lockdown. By forcing a suspension of usual actions, the pandemic has contributed to alter the use of time, and even its perception, hence changing prearranged projects and lifestyles. Invocations of a return to normality, which may qualify conditions of privilege, clash with ‘abnormal’ states where basic life conditions and needs are unattainable in different coexisting contexts (see Di Grazia 2020; Rovatti 2020a, 2020b; Temelkuran 2020). This is evident in the exploitation of migrant labour, in the treatment of asylum seekers and refugees in many parts of the world and, from a general viewpoint, in the struggle of Black Lives Matter and similar movements, as discussed further on. The perspective derived from cultural studies, borrowing Grossberg’s words, entails the epistemic, affective, demanding effort to imagine better maps

and better stories in order to make sense of empirical complexities and offer possible useful interpretations.

In “The Hermeneutics of Crisis and the Crisis of Interpretation” (2020), Brian Schiff tries to answer the question “what is the emerging story that we are making of Covid?” by pointing to the cacophony of interpretations in the social sphere. Conversations are neither stable nor converging, and there are also instrumental narratives strategically framed for intended goals. In addition, the amplitude of racist stereotypes, symbolic violence and hate speech make the crisis of signification even more manifest. Schiff argues in favour of drafting shared interpretations in the midst of the pandemic by trying to make sense of the past, of the crisis and of possible futures through a narrative repair: an interpretative repair of social and collective memory, which he terms “stories in the making,” where people can find their place in solidarity. What words and stories we want to hold onto during the crisis as a means to interpret and bridge past, present and future, is part of our present quest.

For Italian readers, the reflections by Italian philosophers and scholars that originated from the pandemic and were published in *aut aut*, from 7 April to 1 June 2020, engage in a provocative conversation on the intertwined aspects of the pandemic. What I especially appreciate of the ten interventions is the power of their language, which inspires a call to arms for progressive intellectuals. The clarity of expression that materialises and personalises every reaction to the pandemic works pedagogically as an engine to understand, question, debate and contribute to deep thinking. The pedagogical effort is central both to cultural studies and to postcolonial studies as an unavoidable step towards critical awareness and political action. While the contributions in *aut aut* alert against the urge to voice quick interpretations and instant solutions to the pandemic, Pierangelo Di Vittorio’s “La realtà e i cowboy. A proposito del più grande evento mediatico della storia” (“Reality and Cowboys: On the Biggest Media Event in History,” 2020; my translation) expresses the difficulty of elaborating a coherent narrative against the noise of dominant discourses and the spectacularization of events produced by the media and online storytelling. The increased use of digitalisation expands its power to standardise behaviours and trends with the effect of a “mediatisation of everyday lives” that fabricates substitution for facts (2020; my translation). In Di Vittorio’s argument, the *mise-en-scène* of the reality of catastrophe – which he terms “the selfie with the virus” (2020; my translation) – is provoking altered perceptions of reality centred on the self and on the reality show of daily lives. Di Vittorio claims that the hypertrophy of media connection prompts an isolation of the self that obfuscates reality as the place of possible relationships, of unexpected encounters, surprising occurrences and heterogeneous differences.

I have selected Di Vittorio’s statement because it contains references to the notions of alterity and community that are embedded in the idea of reality. As a matter of fact, the imposition of lockdown to control the diffusion of the virus, and the spread of contagion and death, has provoked opposite reactions that, at their extremes, slanted in favour of protective

measures or, conversely, against restrictions. The contrast has been evident with reference to ways in which governments have managed confinement, either by adopting restrictive measures justified by safeguarding the community, as in the case of Italy for example, or by embracing a protective policy of an uncompromising neoliberal economy and unrestrained individual freedom as in Donald Trump's United States of America. At a deeper level of analysis, these attitudes are indicative of opposed ideological positions as regards the notion and use of freedom in relation to the person and the community.

Immunity, freedom, responsibility

In a lecture delivered online on 25 May 2020, titled "Immunitas: Pratiche immunitarie tra politica e medicina" ("Immunitas: Practices of Immunity between Politics and Medicine"; my translation) the Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito explains how the need for immunisation is inherent in modernity, as a form of rationalisation, legitimation and protection of the community that offers security against the perception of risk and prevents contagion (political, social, and biological) through the State, the law and medicine. Esposito claims that we are now at the apex of a process according to which "immunisation has become a form of life" (2020; my translation). However, it would be too simplistic to think of immunisation as a phenomenon born with the Covid-19 pandemic. On the contrary, it has been in place for a long time due to the fact that immunisation is a typical procedure in every society, as Nadia Urbinati and other experts have argued (Esposito 2020). On these grounds, Esposito's analysis is fascinatingly clear and convincing in that it explains how community and immunity, far from indicating oppositional categories, are two complementary notions and must work in balance. Immunity is a negative category: excessive protection might eliminate forms of societal life and produce kinds of political monotheism which clash against each other. A short circuit between risk perception and immunisation may be dangerous as well. In order to imagine feasible political and ethical life projects on a national level, Esposito claims that, because an element of immunisation is embedded in the technical structure of democracy, the balance between immunity and community may be preserved by keeping conflict as a constitutive part of democracy itself. Democratic institutions perhaps take this duty as a political form of constructive conflict: institutionalising movements and mobilising institutions will generate dynamics capable of transforming the institutions themselves into novel instituting bodies.

Esposito's discussion is useful in order to address the notion of freedom in democratic countries, in conversation with Giorgio Agamben's contributions on Quodlibet website and Jean-Luc Nancy's contribution to the Padua Freedom Lecture "Pour libérer la liberté." In "The Invention of an Epidemic" (2020), Agamben expresses disagreement about imposed lockdowns in countries of the Global North, which he interprets as a manoeuvre, sustained through instilling fear, that forces unnecessary limitations on personal freedom and may facilitate the expansion of the state of exception. In a number of contributions, he develops this line of

thought by protesting against the fear of others as potentially infected, which produces a degeneration of human relationships while also strongly restraining personal freedom. Agamben's argument is not in line with populist proclamations, and it has been criticised by those who highlight the need to regulate the delicate relationship between individual free will and the collective responsibility of trying to do the right thing (see Nancy 2020c; Žižek 2020). Clearly, the discussion includes references to how democracy is implemented and managed as a system in order to regulate and protect common living *vis-à-vis* personal liberty.

Individual freedom is one of the most cherished principles of modern societies, as Nancy explains in "Pour libérer la liberté." However, the liberty to choose, to exercise free judgement, to act according to free independent decisions is an illusion of modernity. A subject's self-determination is impossible to achieve, precisely because nobody is in the position to control their lives fully. For Nancy, the exercise of individual liberty is possible contextually: in fact, freedom is not a possession nor a stable quality of the person but may mark a path for the free invention of a new self to come. From this suggestion it is plausible to derive an idea of procedural freedom, which is not simply a set of codified practices institutionally guaranteed but is fabricated and redirected on the basis of social relationships and needs, as philosophical reflections have proposed for quite a long time. Such conviction leads to considerations about commonality and responsibility in democratic contexts, which may be envisaged as forms of mediation for today. During this pandemic, we must internalise rules of caution which should be interpreted as free responsible choices instead of external impositions. Responsibility is an ethical category and ethics is part of politics, Esposito claims. Responsible freedom is therefore an attitude that is respectful of the person and the community. In this sense, it may lead towards regeneration.

This ethical and pragmatic orientation does not seem to have political actualisation in deeply polarised societies where wide-spread inequalities regulate not only access to freedom, but also differential protection of human rights and life itself. Notwithstanding the variety of organisational and legal procedures adopted in the Global North, how enforced lockdown has affected people in countries of the Global South betrays the variables of life conditions, access to privilege and exposure to death. In a number of articles, Arundhati Roy (2020a, 2020b) has described the situation following the emergence of Covid-19 and imposed lockdown in India, clearly addressing the question of right-wing-oriented governments. In "The Pandemic Is a Portal" (2020b), Roy observes India by establishing a network of relations with concomitant political actions in the United States, China and Brazil, using the lens of the social divide established by wealth and poverty, and an analytical insight into instrumental political priorities regardless of people's lives. An observation of the chronology of subsequent events in India since December 2019 shows the sudden political shift of Narendra Modi's government from the denial of a pandemic to the implementation of lockdown in the space of four hours, on 24 March. Millions of poor people were expelled from Indian megacities without food, housing,

work or a place to go. It is now well known that they embarked on long journeys towards their villages: it was a humanitarian disaster of people dying from distress, starvation and police violence along the road. Indeed, the lockdown to enforce physical distance provoked the opposite. Roy is extremely detailed in describing the Indian government's appalling neglect of the needs of the majority of its people, its manipulation of information in order to divert popular attention with palliatives and to identify potential enemies in order to disaggregate social bonds and keep the "prevailing prejudices of religion, class and caste completely in place" (2020b). She envisages this current condition both as a rupture and an opportunity that "in the midst of this terrible despair [...] offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality. [This pandemic] is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next" (2020b). A keyword may then be 'imagination', as a way of pushing thinking and imagining beyond the borders that up to now have constrained the possibility of more humane and just living conditions.

Roy also addresses the questions of accountability and justice in "After the Lockdown, We Need a Reckoning" (2020a), in which she details the costs of Modi's management of the pandemic in terms of unemployment, personal distress and death of poor people. It is not a mere calculation, but an open and passionate alert, both to the Indian nation and to the international community, of how "untouchability" (as a form of caste apartheid in Indian social structure and of religious apartheid being implemented against Muslim citizenship in India) may come to signify that "the very bodies of one class are seen as a biohazard to another." Accountability for this separation which affects working conditions and the distribution of jobs and wealth in the entire world, with inevitable racist inflections, will have to be precisely assigned, independently from the virus (see Jones 2020a, 2020b).

Indian women intellectuals confirm Roy's analyses (see Chaudhary 2020; Zahbi 2020); among them is Anita Gulumurthy, in a conversation with Annalisa Oboe and Claudia Padovani at the "Women, Leadership and Sustainability in Critical Times" webinar, on 5 June.¹ Within the frame of a reflection on the function of knowledge and the leading processes in contemporary societies *vis-à-vis* gender inequality, taking the lead from the Covid-19 crisis, Gulumurthy points to the invisibility and disposability of women in societies dominated by the decay of public institutions, masculine war rhetoric and authoritarian capitalism. In India, there has been a collapse in public space for women because of poverty and state autocracy, and the occasion has been favourable for attacks on democratic institutions, as in other countries (see Harari 2020). From a perspective of gender affirmation, Gulumurthy advocates that from the margins people find new spaces to reclaim their voice. Feminists of all genders will need to disenfranchise themselves and step up by establishing multiple networks of their locales. It is a position in favour of gender innovation, which is important to raise as a keyword in connection with related essential concepts that Covid-19 has brought to the foreground: racism and labour. An intriguing feature of the keywords that I have selected as descriptive of the coronavirus phase

is their interconnectedness. They combine in a logical chain, building on each other to form a composite picture, an ideological and ethical map for reflection and action.

Racism and death

Racism is an ample and complex category because it spans a variety of subjects, objects, conscious and unconscious reactions and dynamics. It sits ambiguously at the back of our minds and deep into our feelings, rooted in inherited words, images, actions and perceptions. It is also shifting and unstable, in ways that inferiority, subordination and fear may be activated depending on the perspective and relationship, both at an individual and collective level. In “What Black America Means to Europe” (2020), Gary Younge constructs a narrative of how racial crimes in the US in the last decades have been reported in the UK, also referring back to colonial times, and examines the recent reaction to the murder of George Floyd throughout Europe. He draws a picture of the roots of racial thinking in Europe and the US and demonstrates how a selective amnesia operates in European thinking to the extent that American racism provokes more indignation than similar practices in Europe. The prevalence of racism in Europe today is clearly visible in the resurgence of fascism, the unfair treatment of asylum seekers and refugees, hate speech and violence. Comparisons invite forms of self-absolution for many white European liberals, Younge claims, as if there can be degrees of admissible racism (see Gilroy et al. 2019; Mba 2020). Only deep engagement and honest questioning of existing racial sediments, categories and behaviours may help change, as racism is embedded in many accepted and unquestioned leading principles of human life and actions.

The ways in which the emergence of Covid-19 has been managed and the high rate of people affected by the virus who are living in poor conditions in countries of the Global North have brought the issue of racism to the foreground due to the manifest connection between poverty and colour. Commenting on popular reactions to lockdown in the United States in “Anti-Lockdown Protesters Have a Twisted Conception of Liberty” (2020), Jamelle Bouie highlights the concept that anti-lockdown protesters’ “notion of freedom derives a lot of its power from the enforcement of racial hierarchy.” Numerically, these protesters may not be a huge number, but it is a fact that the majority of them are white: a calculation that contrasts with the high number of victims of the coronavirus who are mainly brown and black. In Bouie’s argument, today’s demand to reopen the economy in the United States is closely related to ‘whiteness’ and to the assertion of white racial identity as being inherently constituted through self-determination, autonomous will and capacity of control. The combination of whiteness, freedom and autonomy establishes a racial order that cannot be challenged or modified, and which is kept by exercising the right to control. Bouie claims that, in the particular context of a deadly pandemic, this attitude proclaims an absolute predominance of the individual choice over a communal one: “the demand to be free of mutual obligation is, in essence, a demand to be free to die and threaten those around you with illness and death.” This dangerous and powerful

meaning of freedom seems to be informing the political strategy of Donald Trump's presidency (see Bloomfield 2020; Butler 2020; Olivarius 2020).

Death strongly emerges as another keyword, which is embedded in the notion of racism and is also part of the rhetoric of Covid-19. Zadie Smith, in "The American Exception" (2020), constructs a story of a modern United States and analyses how death, for the white wealthy population, has been long negated and ignored in this country's history: "I wish we could have our old life back," Smith quotes from Trump without naming him, "we didn't have death." The kind of death the US has in its history, Smith reveals, "always involved some culpability on the part of the dead," thus liberating the State and the community from accountability. However, on occasion of the pandemic the whole nation is facing death at a higher rate in comparison with other countries in the world. Smith concludes her analysis hoping that the evident perception of death will induce a change in the central focus on private interests in favour of a collective vision of equal health opportunities. Politically, it is a controversial proposal in a country where the partial conquests that Obama Care succeeded in implementing are being demolished, police killing is a consolidated practice, and life, death and care have different weights and rights according to colour. Indeed, as Christopher Lee argues, "Covid-19 isn't simply a medical or epidemiological crisis; it is a crisis of sovereignty" (2020; see also Runciman 2020).

The reference to the current situation in the United States is not functional in reinstating the centrality of the Global North when it is affected by problems that the Global South has already experienced at a high degree, but it is used, instead, as an example of the systemic crisis of the West (of its social, economic, and governmental structures). It is important that the Global North abandons imperial attitudes and starts dealing with the Global South on equal grounds and through respectful dialogue. This perspective was put forth on 13 April 2020, almost a month before the murder of George Floyd on 25 May in Minneapolis by a police officer, when Achille Mbembe published "The Universal Right to Breathe" on the blog of the academic journal *Critical Inquiry* (2020). His essay strikingly identifies the ways in which 'breathing' – the right to rights – is managed, distributed, allocated and protected, in what conditions and for whom. Mbembe's argument offers a radical critical angle over mortality that takes the lead from the basic right to have access to air and also reveals an approach to life informed by African philosophies. It also offers a perspective on immortality, our own and that of the planet, which is increasingly exposed to danger and risk. Life on earth is a shared condition, a communal experience in which we physically participate with our bodies: the earth extends to include our cultures and communities. Mbembe writes that we are now living, symbolically and practically, in the absence of air. Environment, human beings and worldviews are strangled by injustice, disrespect and immobility. In the same way, Covid-19 acts by taking air away. Mbembe's pragmatic, but nonetheless idealistic suggestion, is not to wage war

against a specific virus as against everything that condemns the majority of humankind to a premature cessation of breathing, everything that fundamentally attacks the respiratory tract, everything that, in the long reign of capitalism, has constrained entire segments of the world population, entire races, to a difficult, panting breath and life of oppression. (2020)

Breathing, then, becomes a universal right that cannot be appropriated, expressive of what people have in common: a right to life (physical and social, spiritual and factual, individual and communal). The murder of George Floyd by chokehold signals how difficult the intellectual and civil commitment that Mbembe advises, and that Black Lives Matter has undertaken, is. This movement, which has acquired strength due to the concomitant visibility of social and institutionalised racism in Covid-19 times and the death of George Floyd, is exemplary of extensive militant engagement on the issue of racism, and it sheds light on the possibility of imagining and narrating new stories.

Vis-à-vis the difficulty of interpretation of the events caused by the coronavirus worldwide and the contemporary rise of anti-racist movements, *The Johannesburg Review of Books* has worked to express “solidarity with the progressive literary community and all who fight racism and anti-Black violence” by proposing a “Pan-African anti-racism and solidarity reading list” that promotes the importance of literature as a tool for imagination, understanding and activism. In “They Hate Us like We Murdered Their Entire Family,” Adam Smyer constructs a ‘what-if’ story of impossible causes for the real facts of racism and provocatively speaks against feel-good and do-good attitudes. In the same journal, Wamuni Mbao unpacks the tradition of police murdering civilians in “What Continuities Can Be Drawn from the Murder of Ahmed Timol in Apartheid Joburg to the Killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis?” and demonstrates the network of racism that connects precise events in distant places and times.

I have briefly quoted a few examples that support the force of civil society, of the movements that have generated voice, visibility and action against racism worldwide. They are reinforced in principle by shared ideological and ethical visions and by the cohesion of common goals on which the Left could capitalise, but their struggles take different forms in diverse contexts (see Sandbrook 2020). At this point in my article, I would like to address a specific form of struggle in the time of the coronavirus: that of migrant labour against invisibility.

Migrant labour

A personal reference may help to define my situatedness. One year ago, in *From the European South* (5, 2019), I edited a Special Focus on “Mobility, Immobility and Encounters along the South-North European Route” in order to investigate how institutional constraints on migrant mobility contribute to establishing hostile environments and impact the condition of crisis, risk and new regionalisms in Europe. On the pages of a previous issue of *FES*, in “Bodies as Borders,” Achille Mbembe exposes “a novel imbrication, a symbiotic merging of life and mobility [and] a bifurcation between life on the one hand and bodies on the other hand” which

produces “*discounted bodies [as] movements and events*” (2019, 10-11). In his analysis, mobility impinges on bodies through the category of identity and generates different regimes of freedom that are closely related to strategies of securitisation, as far as migrant mobility is concerned. Mbembe’s reflection sheds light on the current conditions of the pandemic in two ways that are worth highlighting: the different ways in which global mobility has been restricted by lockdown and how the connection of mobility and life leads to further considerations on freedom, racism and death (see Bhabha 2018; Filippi 2020).

It has been superficially argued that lockdown has made immobility a shared condition. On the contrary, Covid-19 has loaded the notions of mobility and the right to move with specificities that have altered the value of mobility as an analytical tool. In “Locked Up in a Lockdown Country” (2020), Ishiaba Kasonga describes the degrees to which the restriction of mobility has affected the condition of migrants in detention centres in the United Kingdom and how the exposure to the risk of death in these centres, and in conditions of unprotected release, also makes diverse forms of death manifest, as is thoroughly documented in the “Report on European Pre-removal Detention Centers during the Covid-19 Pandemic” (2020), elaborated by the Turin-based research group of Human Rights and Migration Law Clinic and the CPR-Research Group under the supervision of Emanuela Roman, Ulrich Stege, and Maurizio Veglio.

Categories of mobility and immobility are not proven to be sufficiently descriptive of the condition of the exploitation of labour of many undocumented migrants, who have rapidly become temporarily invisible, absent from the public national space, as Omid Firouzi Tabar writes in “Le migrazioni nella Pandemia” (“Migrations in the Time of Pandemic” 2020; my translation). In Italy, Firouzi Tabar argues, the construction of the enemy, which has animated anti-migration political rhetoric and media discourse in recent years, now silently operates through a total annihilation of the migrant (as they suddenly disappeared from public discourse) as well as through an overt use of the enemy-construction rhetoric by displacing the strategy of de-politicisation and de-subjectification onto the virus. It is necessary to reclaim these “temporarily empty spaces” and reconfigure a public narrative that establishes a new “regime of truth,” Firouzi proclaims (2020; my translation).

In Italy, migrant labour is indispensable in agriculture, for the functioning of the food industry and the care of elderly people: Covid-19 has made this clear. To affirm the visibility and value of this labour through a resolute call to action for the legal recognition of workers’ rights is a site of struggle that a heterogeneous civil movement consisting of a number of organisations – such as Euronomade, ASGI (Association for legal studies on immigration), local organisations, charities and educational institutions – is trying to pursue. I share Sandro Mezzadra’s opinion that how the coronavirus has been managed is in itself a site of conflict, as he argues in “A Politics of Struggles in Times of Pandemic” (2020), and that “the intensification of social struggles (now and in-coming months) may open spaces of democracy and of ‘cura’ [in the

dual form of ‘care’ and ‘healing’] of the common” (Mezzadra 2020, 7). The coronavirus has exposed these spaces as platforms for engagement: public health, education, labour, the prison system, migration and Europe. And that there is space for civil movements, for social struggles, and for the Left to rebuild a new courageous narrative that should take the lead from the protection of the common (see Nancy 2020a). It is important to point out that the struggle is international, because the common is constitutive of human life: its care and healing are matters of shared responsibility and safeguarding (see Mezzadra 2019 and Biao 2020).

Of course, it is a general suggestion that requires committed politicians and skilled experts working across a variety of fields to be implemented. Economics is not my expertise; however, scholars as diverse as Joseph Stiglitz, Robert Skidelsky, Thomas Piketty and Mariana Mazzucato concur in centring their analyses on how to reform modern capitalism while keeping a sharper focus on the ethics of the common. In *The Value of Everything* (2018), in particular, Mazzucato deals with the question of the production of value in order to observe technological change through the lens of a revised sustainable economic programme that may equip us for more humane forms of sharing.

Imagination

The effort to fight against death, to share affectively the mourning that has hit everybody, and to try and imagine a better world, starting from the disconcerting and painful situation that Covid-19 has provoked, has begun under the rubric of commonality. Black Lives Matter is a popular example, but there is also local, national and transnational activism, as I have tried to show through the mentioning of Italian cases. Relevant models of intellectual militancy and pragmatic contribution are those of African intellectuals who have co-signed a “call to mobilize the intelligence, resources and creativity of Africans to defeat the Covid-19 pandemic” (Nubukpo et al. 2020) and of African thinkers, writers, and academics who have written an open letter to “urge the continent’s leaders to use coronavirus pandemic crisis as opportunity to ‘spur’ radical change” (Soyinka et al. 2020; see also Idrissa 2020). These messages are for common people, intellectuals, educational institutions, political leaders and members of informal sectors alike, as positive exemplary moves.

The distribution of the message and its language are important to counter the arrogant voice of fake news, narcotic information, the confusion and reiterated superficial noise of multiple media and network channels. To tell new stories is the goal of Kenyan journalist Nanjala Nyabola’s “Africa Is Not Waiting to Be Saved from the Coronavirus” (2020), which announces two stories to describe the reactions to the pandemic in Kenya. While criticising the rhetoric of the media which report chronicles of bad government and killing, she raises the story of “communities knitting together their meager resources to fill the gap of failed services and absent states.” Nyabola favours narratives from African communities that do not leave space for neo-colonial interpretations and are appropriate to fill African archives.

From the Global South, suggestions and indications anticipated by intellectuals like Boaventura de Sousa Santos and Jean and John Comaroff in *Epistemologies of the South* (2014) and *Theories from the South* (2011), are also coming. Imagination may be the proper function to overcome the crisis of interpretation that Covid-19 has helped to reveal. We were “unprepared,” as Homi Bhabha contends in a conversation with Margaret MacMillan (2020). Unpreparedness may come from a number of reasons and may be the result of an addiction to routine, a disregard for facts, a laziness of sight, listening and thinking, which Covid-19 has exposed and magnified. The sadness of the contemporary crisis as a moment of unpreparedness, Bhabha argues, is caused exactly by the very condition of our unpreparedness to confront it; explicitly, I would add, to confront death. Indeed, the abrupt entrance of disease and death has shown the precariousness of human existence and our (in)capacity to deal with it, practically and emotionally. Therefore, imagination is the keyword I have chosen to round off this article, to be approached at least in two broad senses, as I have shown in the previous sections: imagination is needed in order to devise new programmes of civil activism and political governance, and it is essential in order to envision and narrate new stories (see Boochani 2018, 2020).

The keywords presented here in their essential relationality tend to develop and cluster around fundamental conflicting and divisive issues of our time. Keeping relationality as a major cohering element, these keywords form a constellation, as it were, of evolving relations and concatenations that draw tentative maps of a conjuncture; through this, Covid-19 has helped to bring to the surface and accelerate some key tensions and contradictions. Making sense of the present conjuncture – of the paradigm shift referred to as “interregnum” by Antonio Gramsci – is part of the ethical commitment of cultural studies (see Chakrabarty 2009).

Notes

¹ The webinar was organised by the ‘Elena Cornaro’ Centre for Gender Studies at Padua University.

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The spectacle of antiracism

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Reni Eddo-Lodge, *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*, Bloomsbury 2017 (272 pages)

Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*, Beacon Press 2018 (192 pages)

ABSTRACT

This review essay examines *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race* (2017) by Reni Eddo-Lodge and *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (2018) by Robin DiAngelo. These books are contextualized within a rich legacy of literature conceptualizing varying histories and manifestations of racism based on the documented experiences of people of colour. In *White Fragility*, DiAngelo recounts her role as a white educator and diversity consultant that regularly hosts trainings to talk to white people about race in the United States. Written in the tone of a workshop manual, the text centres around the notion of 'white fragility', a concept coined by the author to describe a uniform defensiveness that white people respond with when discussing racism and, in particular, when asked to confront their own implicit biases. In *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*, Eddo-Lodge chronicles her experience as a Black woman navigating mainly white spaces that trivialize the violent legacy of the British empire and disregard contemporary manifestations of structural racism. The author highlights the labour, exhaustion, gaslighting, and violence she faces in conversations about race with white people. In this review, I question how DiAngelo's concept of 'white fragility', contextualized within Eddo-Lodge's account of British colonialism and her personal experiences, can be understood as an ongoing strategy of whiteness rooted in the European colonial project. Furthermore, I consider how this application of the concept allows for the interrogation of *who* and *what* specific 'antiracism' efforts serve, and why it may be important to consider these elements in the context of the George Floyd uprisings and the Covid-19 pandemic.

Keywords

white fragility, whiteness, colonialism, antiracism, multiculturalism

In different ways and to varying extents, *White Fragility* and *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Racism* can help frame our thinking about what this current moment requires. What is repeatedly highlighted by the authors is the role of the state as both the architect and the primary perpetrator of systematic damage, and the degree to which this permeates our collective existence. In both the United States and in the United Kingdom, the two geographical sites that the texts speak to, communities mythologized in the white imagination as innately "undesirable" or "dangerous" (DiAngelo 2018, 167-68) are disproportionality dying or facing long-term health issues due to environmental and structural co-morbidities

that exasperate the risks and effects of Covid-19. American and British media, in the tradition of airing racist bigotry under the guise of free speech (Eddo-Lodge 2017, 195-96), have used data tracking community outbreaks to perpetuate the notion that people of colour are responsible for their own mortality due to poor individual decision-making. Yet, a careful analysis of the current moment unveils what writer Amiri Baraka refers to as “the changing same” (DiAngelo 2018, 22), in which perverse and normalized strategies of white supremacy, including extractivism, violence and death, are furthered in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic due to inescapable structures inherent to white supremacy.

Through DiAngelo’s role as a white ‘diversity trainer’ in the United States, *White Fragility* chronicles the hostile interactions she experiences in leading “primarily white audiences in discussions of race” (2018, 39). Recognizing the author’s background as a facilitator of diversity trainings geared to white audiences from a white perspective helps readers to understand the tone of the book, the position from which it is produced, the intended contribution it seeks to provide and to ultimately acknowledge its clear limitations. The book argues that, although white people do not think of themselves in racial terms, they organize themselves in solidarity with one another to reinforce an “unspoken agreement among whites to protect white advantage and not cause another white person to feel racial discomfort” (147). Any sign of discomfort often elicits a defensive response, which DiAngelo refers to as ‘white fragility’. The author argues that ‘white fragility’ is rooted in “the unexamined beliefs that prop up our racial responses” in order to maintain “the racial status quo” (41-42), hindering “cross-racial skill building” (47).

DiAngelo’s text asks white readers to look beyond illusions of the good/bad binary and instead to examine how socialization furthers structural racism and investment in white supremacy. The author explores the integral relationship between anti-blackness and the role of white saviourism in constructing narratives that portray Black people as inherent threats to their own and to others’ well-being. These initial chapters provide the foundation of DiAngelo’s central discussion of the concept to which the book is dedicated, ‘white fragility’. The author details how white people are ‘triggered’ to respond with ‘white fragility’ in efforts to “restore equilibrium” in reaction to the momentary loss of social capital (241). DiAngelo argues that this cycle of disequilibrium and restoration is so engrained through socialization that it distorts white people’s perception of danger, ultimately facilitating their ability to perpetrate harm and violence onto those that are the actual subjects of racial violence. The author ultimately encourages white people to engage in a self-led resocialization process to both recognize and interrupt their own (and each other’s) innate biases and racist behaviour.

Eddo-Lodge’s book, *Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People About Racism* (2017), is based on a blog post featured in the book’s preface. The blog post outlines the deep frustration that Eddo-Lodge experiences as a Black British woman over white people’s trivialization and outright denial of the legacy and manifestations of structural racism. Eddo-Lodge

highlights the labour, exhaustion, gaslighting, and perpetual fear of violence that she grapples with in discussing race in the United Kingdom. The blog post concludes with the author stating that, in response, she is setting a boundary to no longer talk to white people about race unless she “absolutely [has] to” (11). After circulation on social media, the blog post led to the publication of her book, in which she confronts the legacy of British imperialism and identifies contemporary expressions of white supremacy with the intention to provide the “political backdrop you need to anchor your opposition to racism” (18).

Inspired by the popular phrase: “We are here because you were there” (32), Eddo-Lodge awakes Britain’s colonial amnesia by highlighting how the British population came to be so diverse within the last 150 years: “We need to let it be known that black is British, that brown is British, and that we are not going away” (308-09). The book also explores racism within seemingly ‘progressive’ spaces. Namely, the author dedicates two chapters to discuss white feminism and to examine the relationship between race and class, unpacking common arguments from those who dismiss race as a factor of precarity. While the chapter on feminism provides the space to discuss intersectional feminism, the chapter on race and class highlights differentiations between perceptions and actualities that comprise class divisions, membership and racial makeup within British society. Importantly, the author discusses ways in which racial capitalism extracts cultural and social capital from communities it actively oppresses (269). Eddo-Lodge mainly aims to validate and legitimize her own experiences and those of other people of colour living in Britain, while contextualizing these experiences within a history of systemic ‘white fragility’. Ultimately, Eddo-Lodge highlights that the struggle of antiracism is one which rejects white heroism, urges the risk of potential marginalization, and refuses detached objectivity (305-7).

In what follows, I wish to question how DiAngelo’s concept of ‘white fragility’, contextualized both within Eddo-Lodge’s account of British colonialism and her personal experiences, can be understood as an ongoing strategy of whiteness rooted in the European colonial project. Furthermore, I consider how this application of the concept allows for the interrogation of *who* and *what* specific ‘antiracism’ efforts serve, and why it may be important to consider these elements in the context of the George Floyd uprisings and the Covid-19 pandemic.

DiAngelo’s brief discussion of the American settler-colonial project records the complexity and extensiveness of its history, noting in particular “the abduction and enslavement of African people, the displacement and genocide of Indigenous people, and the annexation of Mexican lands” (63). Fixated on the centuries of violence toward indigenous groups and enslaved people, DiAngelo’s description of American history renders the narratives of organized resistance and political imagination of oppressed people invisible and reveals roots of the liberal construction of antiracism.

Historian Vincent Brown recounts assemblies of 18th-century abolitionists around “the

image of a kneeling supplicant begging to be recognized as a man and a brother [... an] icon of abjection,” portraying the enslaved as submissive and, importantly, innocent (2020, 17-18). Brown argues that this vision of abjection continues to configure contemporary approaches to race (18). The failure to recognize the role of militant movements to pose viable threats to the European colonial project, leading to the formation of autonomous communities and the eventual abolition of slavery, reproduces harmful prerequisites for emancipation of any kind, namely submission and innocence. The shrouding of insurgencies within the nation’s history also removes the context to which ‘white fragility’ was born. Brown describes how exchanges between European colonists and militant Africans exposed colonialists’ “brittleness and insecurity”, in which the exercise of brutal violence was justified as a response to militancy (17): a manifestation of ‘white fragility’. The historical placement of ‘white fragility’ within the imperial project recognizes the implications of its expression as an inherited and long-existing strategy of whiteness.

The strategic utility of ‘white fragility’ as an organizing principle of imperial powers is evident in the numerous examples that Eddo-Lodge provides when recounting tactics employed to mitigate the presence of populations from Britain’s colonial peripheries. Driven by what journalist Charles Blow (2018) refers to as “white extinction anxiety,” Eddo-Lodge highlights ways in which the British state apparatus activates its institutions and generates policies to exercise systemic violence against people of colour in “fear of a black planet” (173). Eddo-Lodge explains the historical anxiety perpetuated in contemporary Britain, in which “the alienated ‘other’ will take over” (174). As a strategy of white supremacy, racist tropes evoking the impending threat that “the black man will have the whip hand over the white man” (173) are used to justify the continued subjugation of people of colour as a matter of self-preservation in a looming ‘majority-minority society’; a manifestation of ‘white fragility’ rooted in the ‘brittleness and insecurity’ expressed by European colonists. These measures are met with complacency in the British media, as “wishy-washy liberalism” is evoked in the commodification of racialized human beings to demonstrate how their potential value outweighs their presupposed inevitable burden (195).

Eddo-Lodge argues that in recognition of its own frailty, expressions and manifestations of white supremacy compulsively adapt in order to remain relevant (Eddo-Lodge 2017, 264). Examining the variety of contexts and methods in which ‘white fragility’ has been implemented as a strategy of force demonstrates its effective use in causing intergenerational emotional, psychological and physiological harm to people of colour. By examining the histories in which racism is practiced and the resistance movements relevant to specific struggles, we can better identify when white fragility is being implemented to further the political project of whiteness.

It is with this lens that I examine the “cross-racial skill building” (DiAngelo 2018, 47) that DiAngelo promotes in her confrontation with ‘white fragility’. As previously noted, DiAngelo bases the book’s claims on her own experience of leading activities, such as trainings and

workshops, to examine the white identity in a collective forum in efforts to ‘teach’ diversity. Complemented by a series of ‘diversity’ policies (e.g. quota systems), among other measures, these activities are often hosted by companies and corporations seeking to bring ‘racial awareness’ to their predominately white staff in efforts to increase and retain the presence of people of colour willing to perform assimilation within those spaces. While participant self-flagellation is encouraged, the author’s clients, such as multi-billion-dollar companies Amazon and Unilever, are not required to engage in transformative models of accountability, nor the recognition and repair of historical and current inequities. Instead, this corporate-led model becomes a superficial exercise intrinsic to multiculturalism, in which figures that actively do harm capitalize on the aesthetics of diversity and are, accordingly, granted praise for substituting the dismantling of whiteness by recognizing its existence.

This mainstreaming of ‘soft’ discussions on race impedes an understanding of whiteness as a political project that is constantly in the process of becoming (Yancy 2005, 9), amounting to a spectacle of anti-racism that reinforces the “axiological, political and material power of whiteness” as a political project (6). Based on what scholar Asad Haider (2017) refers to as an “ideology of racial hygiene,” this spectacle of anti-racism seeks to “eliminate undesirable elements from the white identity” by commodifying the aesthetics of diversity, while simultaneously inducing little, if any, change to the material realities produced through the nexus of “imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (hooks 2012, 4).

The promotion of this form of anti-racism work in imperial powers like the United States and the United Kingdom is a strategy of ‘white fragility’ intended to divorce the material implications of acknowledging histories of imperialism and assimilation from what the struggle of antiracism embodies: the collective struggle for freedom. Reducing the dismantling of whiteness to a set of formulas that can ‘fix’ or minimize the effects of structural racism recalls the imagery of abjection used by 18th-century abolitionists to appeal to the moral compass of those both exercising oppression and reaping the benefits from its longevity. There is no historical precedence exemplifying the compassion of oppressive groups in facilitating the liberation of the oppressed. Instead of encouraging the formation and expansion of transformative multiracial alliances that pose viable resistance to racial capitalism, these symbolic models of change offer greater investment in the structures that cause the greatest damage – a form of social stratification akin to the rigidity of caste systems (Wilkerson 2020). Instead of “condemning the state’s capacity to act like a god and destroy people’s lives, we try to mitigate the damage,” scholar Joy James states in a 2019 lecture at Brown University, this is what “works to facilitate admission to a cage, so that we can do some good deeds as opposed to dismantling the cage.”

The rich discussions featured in *Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People About Race* provide a foundation to explore DiAngelo’s concept of ‘white fragility’ as a historically situated

strategy of white supremacy. This approach challenges ways in which popular antiracism exercises, such as diversity trainings, facilitate the normalization of ‘soft’ discussions on race through an elusive spectacle of antiracism, failing to pose any viable threat to the structures and ideology of white supremacy. The uprisings following the murder of George Floyd demonstrate how the spectacle of antiracism rewards docile calls for change, while demonizing individuals and movements which seek to transform the structures of power, further highlighting “the dialectic that [exists] between white supremacy and Black degradation” (Yancy 2005, 4).

It is this precise dynamic that Eddo-Lodge poignantly describes, by highlighting the systemic violence that people of colour have historically faced in the United Kingdom and the ways in which organized resistance has been and continues to be challenged by employing violent strategies rooted in ‘white fragility’. This same dynamic points to the inadequacy of diversity trainings and other expressions of multiculturalism to contest the profound emotional, psychological and physiological effects of white supremacy and, thus, reveal the significant limitations inherent to DiAngelo’s *White Fragility*.

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Black women’s voices reach out to the world

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Djamila Ribeiro, *Il luogo della parola*, translated from Portuguese by Monica Paes.
Alessandria: Capovolte, 2020 [2019] (112 pages)

ABSTRACT

The enduring struggle of black feminism to make the voice of marginalized groups matter is developed in this book by Djamila Ribeiro, a Black Brazilian feminist philosopher and journalist, through the notion of “the place of the word” and the issue of the accessibility of knowledge. In her work *Lugar de Fala* (The Place of the Word, 2019), she comes across the longstanding history of black women’s fights and resistance, challenging the universal epistemology that constantly misreads some voices instead of others. This book, recently translated into Italian, French, and Spanish, is aimed at producing a tool for political action by crossing geographical, political, and social borders and supporting black women’s empowerment and self-awareness. According to the radical idea of accessibility of knowledge, Ribeiro speaks to everyone, democratizing the access to certain concepts and tools. This political task has been taken on by an independent Italian publishing house, which carried on Ribeiro’s effort in the European context.

Keywords

feminism, intersectionality, translation, decoloniality, Brazil

In the introduction to their cornerstone work on Black Women Studies called *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*, Gloria T. Hull and Barbara Smith state that “like any politically disenfranchised group, Black women could not exist consciously until we began to name ourselves” (Hull and Smith 1982, xvii). We might argue that Djamila Ribeiro’s essay goes exactly in this direction: naming herself, and so naming – and changing – black women’s conditions in Brazil through an effort of positionality and radical critical pedagogy. The book – in the original version *O que é lugar de fala?* (Ribeiro 2019) – is not merely an essay or a philosophical speculation, but a tool for political action.

Born in 1980 in Santos, Brazil, Ribeiro grew up surrounded by politics, due to her father’s commitment to communist fights and, later, to the encounter with black feminist writers at the House of Black Woman’s Culture (Casa de Cultura da Mulher Negra). Currently engaged as a writer, philosopher, Black feminist and antiracist activist, she has endeavored to produce a tool for Black women’s empowerment well beyond the academic field (Affricot 2020). In a context strongly influenced by its colonial past and history of slavery, Brazil keeps reproducing

structural inequalities and social orders, which today are even stronger due to the rise of a right-wing government. Black women's conditions are still addressed by scholars, activists and politicians, not without consequences. Just two years ago, in 2018, Marielle Franco – a feminist, LGBT activist, and councilwoman – was murdered in circumstances yet to be clarified. Ribeiro's work is situated in this social and political setting. Hence the idea of publishing a series called "Feminismos Plurais," which she actually managed to do, in order to encourage and diffuse the voices of marginalized groups, and then the publication of her own book on Black feminist thought, the first of a series.

'Voice' is the core of Ribeiro's reflections, both as a need and as a repertoire of contention. Drawing on a vast literature, *Lugar de Fala* is intended to "clarify the main concepts [of Black feminism] and definitely break with the idea that this discussion wouldn't be oriented to realize goals. [...] Reflecting on Black feminism properly means to interrupt the split produced in an unequal society. It means creating projects, new civilizing goals, in order to think about a new model of society" (2020, 15-16; my translation). Subjects are considered as the "core elements" in the rupture of the dominant narrative: as such, speaking "in our own name" (Hall 1990, 222) is a way to "becom[e] a subject" (Kilomba 2012, 13).

Ribeiro situates her overview of Black women's voices through a historical lens. In the first chapter "A little bit of history" ("Un po' di storia"), she identifies in the abolitionist and activist for Black women's rights, Sojourner Truth, the critical juncture in the development of Black women's thoughts and fights. Truth's outcry "Ain't I a Woman?" (1851), already questioned the universality of the category of woman. Despite the idea of a homogenous first wave of feminism, Truth's testimony shows a fragmented landscape where Black women challenged white women's prejudice and racism. Rather than a lack of history, Ribeiro points out a lack of visibility of these stories, because of a hierarchization of knowledge along lines of gender, class, and race (Gonzalez 1984). By controlling the history and the voices that 'can be heard,' language becomes a vehicle of reproduction of power, especially in those countries such as Brazil where a plurality of marginalized groups has been historically silenced. This consideration leads us to challenge a universal epistemology that keeps silencing cultural specificity and popular knowledge, which are considered less legitimate and less authoritative. Through the agenda of 'identity politics,' mainstream academics have divested Black women and third world women's thoughts, ignoring their effort to address identities not as biological axes but as social sites of power, privileges, and oppressions.

The challenge towards a hegemonic production of knowledge also regards feminist literature, as Ribeiro outlines in the second chapter "The black woman: the other of the other" ("La donna nera: l'altro dell'altro"). While in her foundational writings Simone de Beauvoir focuses on women as "the other" of men, she nonetheless reproduces a vacuum, excluding Black women who, according to Kilomba, occupy a 'third' space and keep existing in the silence of academic thinking (Kilomba 2012). Hence, another angle of understanding is need-

ed: intersectionality. Axes of domination do not follow a hierarchical order, but dynamically define people's position in the social setting. Race, gender, class, religion, age, and so on are dimensions that produce certain possibilities rather than others. Unveiling these dimensions means naming lines of power that always shape and define the social world.

But then, why is it important to talk about “the place” of speech? The answer is rooted in the enduring feminist reflection on positionality and the empirical dimensions of life. Feminist standpoint theory (Collins 1997; Haraway 1988) already unveiled the place from where people speak as a determining factor in shaping what people can see and can say. However, Ribeiro develops the concept further. The issue of location and positionality is not merely about individuals, but it is about the intersection between the social condition of the social group the individual belongs to, and the specific experience of the individual. As such, people pertaining to the same social group are usually incurring in a common matrix of domination (Collins 1990). However, they also have a peculiar experience depending on their unique way of inhabiting everyday life. These two dimensions are always interwoven and play with each other, and neither exists without the other. Answering her famous question “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (Spivak 1988), Spivak seems to come to a negative conclusion. The history of colonialism and dispossession makes Black and third world women unable to raise their own voice. Other scholars, such as Ribeiro, reject this denial and claim that these women must break “the mask of speechlessness” (Kilomba 2012). Through slots and cracks in the wall, Black women are challenging their starting point of domination and dispossession, telling their story and changing their biographical and collective trajectories.

As Ribeiro argues in the last chapter “Everyone has a place of speech” (“Tutti hanno un luogo di parola”), whoever speaks is speaking from a social location. In contemporary debates, learning to acknowledge the social location from where everyone is speaking is the only way to become aware of the dynamic identities, conditions and lines of power crossing the field. Ribeiro orients her work politically rather than academically. She constantly stresses the importance of language, words, and communication. Collecting the main concepts of Black feminism is a conscious political work, aimed at transmitting these concepts to the largest possible audience, especially in terms of black Brazilian women, Latinas, and people belonging to marginalized groups. Ribeiro chooses to take the reader by the hand and lead her through the history of Black feminist thought and contemporary challenges, engaging in a constant effort of relation with the reader. Language and knowledge are vehicles of power and spreading knowledge, that is, making it accessible beyond the mere academic field, is a wide empowering project. To this effect, Ribeiro's task is an exercise of pedagogy of the oppressed, where liberation is “not a gift, not a self-achievement, but a mutual process” (Freire 1971, 53).

Ribeiro's book is a political work for three reasons. Firstly, because it aims at guaranteeing a wide understanding among Black women that is oriented to their empowerment. Secondly, it is a political work because of the translation in several other countries. Finally, because

through the choices of an understandable language and translation, it spreads Black women's voices beyond the thick blanket of silence.

Translating can be a feminist task, as in this case. In the Italian context, translating helps to spread the words of black scholars, as recently occurred with other important works, such as the ones of Angela Davis (2018) and Audre Lorde (2014). Translating concepts and words from one language to another requires an effort of relation (both with the text and with the author) based on a feminist understanding of the circulation of knowledge and mutual acknowledgement. Moreover, the project of translation comes from a newborn independent, self-financed, and feminist publishing house, called Capovolte, which aims at dispersing feminist words beyond the strict neoliberal rules of the mainstream editorial market. Daring to make a comparison, it seems to resonate with the 1980 project Kitchen Tables: Women of Color Press, which was cofounded by Beverly and Barbara Smith in order to help the work of feminist and lesbian of colour writers be published despite the white, male-dominated commercial publishing system.

Heeding Ribeiro's call for positionality and self-awareness, I would like to conclude this review by starting a dialogue. I am a young, white, cis, and queer Sardinian woman. According to my positionality, or my "place of speech," I started by going through the colonial background that strongly influenced my island's history and present time, and also my own experience as a displaced Sardinian woman. Going beyond the idea of a "hierarchy of oppressions" regarding identities, I learned to understand the oppressions and privileges that come with this background, and how they change in the different contexts of my everyday life. Indeed, despite the colonial legacy of my insular roots, I am a white and cis woman, who certainly enjoys the privilege of whiteness and gender conformity. I read Ribeiro as a dialogue from a Southern Italian perspective, where she was teaching me new words, and I discovered a new way of naming my experience. Her work is an invitation to reflect on our own locations, on our bodies, and the possible transformative steps we can take. Last but not least, Ribeiro's work is also an invitation to listen. Black women's decision to speak and to break the silence of hegemonic narratives requires those who are in a position of social power to start listening to their words. As such, raising one's voice is always a relational endeavour.

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On pandemic solidarity

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Marina Sitrin and Colectiva Sembrar (eds.), *Pandemic Solidarity: Mutual Aid during the Covid-19 Crisis*, Plutopress 2020 (304 pages)

ABSTRACT

The book *Pandemic Solidarity: Mutual Aid during the Covid-19 Crisis* (2020) comprises multiple accounts of horizontal and mutually supportive self-organisation that have emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic in different places throughout the world. The book gives a voice to activists who portray how lives in the margins contextualised within the midst of a global pandemic activate networks of material, emotional and artistic support in efforts to overturn the competitive logic of neoliberal society. This review highlights how the Covid-19 crisis has exacerbated mechanisms of exclusion and social injustice that are not exceptional but structural to the global society in which we live, regulated by the triad of capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy. The forms of resistance to this crisis are not extraordinary measures of self-organisation: they re-emerge from a long history of collectivity, pre-existing resistance networks and uncompetitive sociality, which were already part of the political life of those who inhabit the margins – from Rojava to the P.I.G.S.

Keywords

mutualism, solidarity networks, Covid-19 crisis, care

The volume *Pandemic Solidarity: Mutual Aid during the Covid-19 Crisis* (2020) edited by Marina Sitrin and Colectiva Sembrar features a series of experiences of horizontal and mutually supportive self-organisation that have emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic in different places of the world. It is organised on the basis of continental macro-areas, highlighting places which can be understood to share the commonality of belonging to different ‘Souths’ – both internal and global (Sousa Santos 2014); or, places which challenge the North-South geographical dualism through their historical existence. These places are located, in various ways, on the margins, inhabited by communities of people that are often marginalised, whose lives have been made invisible and precarious already before the pandemic; or as marginal spaces at the edge of national states and welfare systems.

The text opens with a first section dedicated to the “Greater Middle East,” then divided into three subsequent chapters, relating to Rojava, Turkey and Iraq, respectively. One of the themes that seems to unite this section of the text is the constant presence of a state of crisis that precedes Covid-19 in a region that has been historically subjected to political and social

instability. The metaphor of war – albeit with new weapons and a new enemy – is constantly present in the pandemic narrative, as it is part of the shared experience.

In the first chapter, written by Emre Sahin and Khabat Abbas, on Rojava – or, The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (NES) – the experiences of Kurdish self-organization during the pandemic have followed the extraordinary forms of survival already experienced in the various stages of the Rojava conflict and of the Syrian Civil War. Online classes were conducted during the multiple military attacks by the Turkish state. Nevertheless, during the pandemic online classes caused new social problems: for example, how is the condition of mental and emotional health of children and adolescents isolated from their own friends for a long time? And how about their teachers? These challenges highlight the social implications of the education system: not only as a service given by the State, but a specific space of creation of bonds and relationships.

“The king is naked,” says Seyma Özdemir in the second chapter of the book (77), dedicated to the Turkish experience: Covid-19 showed “the inability of governing.” In addition to distributing health kits to indebted and homeless people, as well as organising groups among neighbours to share care and resources, it was also necessary to build a new narrative in opposition to the authoritarian negationism of Erdogan.

In Chapter 3, which deals with “Solidarity Network in Iraq During Covid-19,” Midya Khudhur talks about the virus as the ‘invisible enemy’ which must be fought against by people in Iraq, who are used to be involved in wars among visible enemies. The author interviews activists from different geographical locations in Iraq in order to represent the internal differences, challenges and political responses in a complex nation. One of the main issues discussed by different activists involved is a continuity of a state of emergency in their respective regions and the necessity to understand the specificities of the Covid-19 crisis, compared with the other exceptional periods.

The second section is dedicated to South and East Asia, focusing on Taiwan, South Korea and India. In Chapter 4, Chia-Hsu Jessica Chang outlines different voices from Taiwan, under the common theme of “Sharing Spaces and Crossing Borders,” the title of her text. This chapter argues that Covid-19 corresponds to a crisis of a violent and inhumane economic and social system already rooted in a specific form of social distancing: “in the modern/colonial world, we are disciplined to be lonely” (105), she writes.

Chapter 5 discusses disability activism in South Korea, or, the activism of “those who must refuse to keep social distance” (132). Disability activist Ji Young Shin says that we should think about the pandemic as the generalisation of an experience that, in an ableist world, we are used to think about as particular – namely that of disease (physical and mental) and the fragility of our bodies. For the first time, we have to imagine new ways of being together, not all based on the protagonism of the healthy body.

Chapter 6, by Debarati Roy, is dedicated to India and specifically focused on the neces-

sity of rethinking the role of minorities in Indian society. Roy's text shows how the presence of historical conditions of subalternity made the experience of the pandemic worse for specific social groups. According to the author, the spread of the Covid-19 crisis immediately corresponded to an increase of Islamophobic feelings among people. Beginning with the diffusion of fake news on social networks, Muslim people have been deemed responsible for the contagions. Although the interviewer did not directly ask about the religious belongings of the interviewed, Muslim activists are identified as active contributors to solidarity networks, serving people across religious faiths. Roy also points to the experiences of *hijras*, the third gender identity recognised in India. Even though *hijras* are deeply stigmatised, their network of solidarity – primarily used as a form of reciprocal support among transgender people – was activated in order to help the wider population during the pandemic.

The third section is dedicated to Southern Africa and includes one chapter, written by Boaventura Monjane and titled: "Confronting State Authoritarianism: Civil Society and Community-Based Solidarity in Southern Africa." This text consists of a comparative analysis across three different states: Mozambique, South Africa and Zimbabwe. All three are governed by authoritarian regimes which applied restrictive, militarised measures in order to contain the spread of the virus.

The importance of this chapter is to force us to rethink of the difficult relationship between security and democracy during the context of the pandemic, in a specific period where people are vulnerable to accept stringent measures in order to feel safe. The texts speak from a specific place of the world, outside the unique Eurocentric narratives on dualism made by white philosophy, who failed to highlight the differences of privilege in standing points.

The fourth section is dedicated to what we can describe as the European internal Souths. Reading the texts written by Laís Gomes Duarte and Raquel Lima on "Intersectional Solidarity in Portugal" allows readers to contemplate on how to break the pietistic and charitable, and therefore paternalistic and colonial, understanding of solidarity, as typically carried out by States, supranational institutions, and even by certain humanitarian associations. The authors challenge readers to consider the creation of aid networks that are, above all, networks of exchange between equals.

During the pandemic, as written by Eleanor Finley in the chapter "Solidarity Flourishes Under Lockdown in Italy," Italy faced a proliferation of self-managed community canteens, support desks and all those networks for the collective management of 'commons' that make material goods, spaces, forms of life accessible for everybody.

In Chapter 10, written by EP and TP about "Solidarity Networks in Greece," we read that in many cities in Greece several medical centres are based on self-organised solidarity, thus refusing the logic of the market and profit applied on health, as well as the hierarchies of race and citizenship which regulate access to fundamental rights.

In his text about "Viral Solidarity: Experiences from the UK," Neil Howard highlights how

experiences of radical solidarity took place where there have already been several struggles facing forms of radically impoverished and/or structurally excluding welfare. Unsurprisingly, the inadequacy of the public aid system, especially in fields such as public health, has been at the centre of political debates.

The fifth section is focused on “Turtle Island,” that is, “the name many Indigenous peoples give to the landmass known as North America” (289), according to Carla Bergman and Magalí Rabasa, authors of the only chapter of this session with Ariella Patchen and Seyma Özdemir. This chapter is particularly wide, highlighting different cases of self-organised networks through voices of activists. It is, arguably, one of the most “intersectional” texts of the book, discussing subjects such as indigenous organisations, immigrant communities, prisoner solidarity, online mutual aid networks, people who are unhoused or precariously housed, and autonomous health organizing.

The last part of the book consists of two chapters dedicated to South America. Chapter 13 is written by Nancy Viviana Piñeiro and Liz Mason-Deese from Argentina. They reflect on how practicing solidarity in the time of Covid-19 is also an exercise of memory, considering the importance that it has in the construction of political identity in Argentina after the dictatorship.

Chapter 14 is focused on Brazil, in which similar attention is provided to the continuity of solidarity movements born before the pandemic and reactivated during the year. According to Vanessa Zettler, Brazilian grassroots organisations never ceased to exist, holding together students, *aldeias* of indigenous people, and self-organised groups in the favelas. From the artists who organised digital poetry slams during the lockdown (#SarauemTemposdeCorona) to the intersectional collectives of “feminismo favelado” whom provide material, emotional, psychological and pedagogical support.

The most enlightening aspect of this book is the way in which it highlights how the ‘crisis’ caused by Covid-19 did not invent forms of social exclusion, existential precariousness or radical inequality between lives considered not worthy of being lived (Butler 2004). It is, on the contrary, a crisis of an already violent economic and social system. By collecting the voices of those who practice and imagine these radical forms of life – on the occasion of the biggest human and social crisis in colonial and patriarchal capitalism – we face a structured cartography of the limits of this same system, marked daily by those who inhabit those margins. It appears, in other words, what Partha Chatterjee (2004) would define “[t]he politics of the governed”: a set of political practices implemented by diverse social groups who live on the edge of the national state and its differentially inclusive welfare.

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