

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

Melissa Tandiwe Myambo

University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg

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.

References

- Alcock, Charles. 2020. “UK Imposes Quarantine on Most Arrivals from June 8.” *AINonline*, May 22. <https://www.ainonline.com/aviation-news/air-transport/2020-05-22/uk-imposes-quarantine-most-arrivals-june-8>. Accessed October 9, 2020.
- Banerjee, Paula. 2020. “Covid-19: Redrawn Borders, Redefined Lives online webinar organized by Calcutta Research Group.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1fzIDVbmoHY>. Accessed October 9, 2020.
- Brown, Faye. 2020. “UK only country in world not doing airport health checks or closing border.” *Metro*, May 7. <https://metro.co.uk/2020/05/07/uk-country-world-not-airport-health-checks-closing-border-12669125/>. Accessed October 9, 2020.
- Charlton, Sarah. 2019. “Down by the River: Park Dwellers, Public Space and the Politics of Invisibility in Johannesburg’s Northern Suburbs.” *Transformation: Critical Perspectives on Southern Africa* 101: 127-150.
- Chua, Amy. 2018. *Political Tribes: Group Instinct and the Fate of Nations*. New York: Penguin Press.
- Dodson, Belinda. 2013. “Southern Africa: Gender and Migration.” *The Encyclopedia of Global Human Migration*. London: Blackwell. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/book/10.1002/9781444351071>. Accessed October 9, 2020.
- Donnan, Shawn, and Lauren Leatherby. 2019. “Globalization Isn’t Dying, It’s Just Evolving.” *Bloomberg*, July 23. <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2019-globalization/?srnd=premium>. Accessed October 9, 2020.
- Frassinelli, Pier Paolo. 2019. *Borders, Media Crossings and the Politics of Translation: The Gaze from Southern Africa*. New York: Routledge.

- Harrois, Thibaud. 2018. "Towards 'Global Britain'? Theresa May and the UK's Role in the World after Brexit." *Observatoire de la société britannique* 21 (51-73). <http://journals.openedition.org/osb/2119>. Accessed October 9, 2020.
- Georgi, Fabian. 2019. "Toward Fortress Capitalism: The Restrictive Transformation of Migration and Border Regimes as a Reaction to the Capitalist Multicrisis." *Canadian Review of Sociology* 56 (4): 556-579.
- Gindin, Sam. 2020. "Inoculating Against Globalization: Coronavirus and the Search for Alternatives." *The Bullet*, March 12. <https://socialistproject.ca/2020/03/inoculating-globalization-coronavirus/>. Accessed October 9, 2020.
- Jordheim, Helge. 2012. "Against Periodization: Koselleck's Theory Of Multiple Temporalities." *History and Theory* 51 (2): 151-171.
- Horber, Jen. 2020. "South Africa: Housing Crisis More Complex Than It Seems." *GroundUp*, July 6. <https://www.groundup.org.za/article/housing-crisis-bigger-government/>. Accessed October 9, 2020.
- Mezzadra, Sandro. 2007. "Living in Transition: Toward a Heterolingual Theory of the Multitude." *Trasversal* 06. <https://transversal.at/transversal/1107/mezzadra/en>. Accessed October 9, 2020.
- . 2020. "Covid-19: Redrawn Borders, Redefined Lives online webinar organized by Calcutta Research Group." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1fzIDVbmoHY>. Accessed October 9, 2020.
- Mezzadra, Sandro, and Brett Neilson. 2013. *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labour*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Mukumbang, Ferdinand C., Anthony N. Ambe, and Babatope O. Adebisi. 2020. "Unspoken inequality: how Covid-19 has exacerbated existing vulnerabilities of asylum-seekers, refugees, and undocumented migrants in South Africa." *International Journal for Equity in Health* 19 (141).
- Murray, Martin. 2011. *City of Extremes: The Spatial Politics of Johannesburg*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Myambo, Melissa Tandiwe. 2014. "The Global Gym." www.homosumhumani.com, January 1. <http://nebula.wsimg.com/c7d88215421889acbe78cd5c992606e0?AccessKeyId=0ED037C7B AF44342E4A9&disposition=0&alloworigin=1>. Accessed October 9, 2020.
- Myambo, Melissa Tandiwe, and Pier Paolo Frassinelli. 2019. "Introduction: Thirty Years of Borders Since Berlin." *New Global Studies* 13 (3): 277-300.
- Samaddar, Ranabir, ed. 2020. *Borders of an Epidemic: Covid-19 and Migrant Workers*. Kolkata: Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group.
- Watts, Edward. 2020. "What Rome Learned from the Deadly Antonine Plague of 165 A.D." *Smithsonian Magazine*, April 28. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/what-rome-learned-deadly-antonine-plague-165-d-180974758/>. Accessed October 9, 2020.
- Weintroub, Jill. 2019. "Affinities of Fear: Producing 'Safe' Spaces in a Suburb North of Joburg." In *Reversing Urban Inequality in Johannesburg*, edited by Melissa Tandiwe Myambo, 45-55. Oxford: Routledge.
- Xiang, Biao. 2020. "Shock Mobility: Acute convulsions in human migration may have long-term impacts." *FluchtforschungsBlog*, June 17. <https://blog.fluchtforschung.net/shock-mobility/>. Accessed October 9, 2020.
- Young, Graham. 2020. "Streets apart! The road split by lockdown with one side in Birmingham - the other in Walsall". *Birmingham Live*, September 15. <https://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/midlands-news/streets-apart-road-split-lockdown-18926383>. Accessed October 9, 2020.

Melissa Tandiwe Myambo is a Research Associate at the University of the Witwatersrand. After receiving her PhD from New York University, she held postdoctoral fellowships at the University of California, Los Angeles, and the University of Cape Town. She has also been a Johannesburg Institute for Advanced Study Writing Fellow and the recipient of a Fulbright-Nehru Academic and Professional Excellence Award to conduct research in India where she was affiliated with the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies in Delhi. Her research focuses on globalization, migration, inequality, diasporas, political economy, borders, race/ethnicity, the global middle classes – especially hipsters – and urban studies. She is the editor of *Reversing Urban Inequality in Johannesburg*. All her writings can be found on her website, www.homosumhumani.com.