Viralscapes. The bodies of others after COVID-19

Anibal Garcia Arregui
March, 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic reveals a vital-lethal entanglement of human and nonhuman bodies at a global scale. This post first draws attention on how different viral strains may interplay within and across species, both biologically and socially. The essay then considers the emerging multispecies viralscapes as a 'wild' planetary niche that binds bodies in ways for which technoscientific projects of domestication are obsolete.

'Wild boars do not comply with confinement', says a twitter commentator on March 20th. In effect, wild boars roam freely along the empty streets of Barcelona while people follow the quarantine lock down of the COVID-19. I am part of a collaborative project revolving around the anthropology of hunting, veterinary medicine, and wild boars. Personally, I follow the particular case of some surprising porcine neighbours of Barcelona. Today my ethnographic 'subjects' are outside and I am writing from home confinement, trying to track the unruly pigs through the internet.

The presence of wild boars is not new to Barcelona. However, the mobility of these swine guests is now less hindered than ever as they move into the urban hub. Italian wild boars had the same idea in Genoa. In fact, it is a pioneering momentum for many other species as well: wild turkeys and deer have been seen in different urban contexts, wild ducks swim in the Fontana di Trevi, hungry monkeys fight over food after tourist-feeders disappeared from the streets of Lopburi (Thailand).

> *COVID-19 is bringing a wide range of animals into the new textures of viral cities.*

But even though one might think so, COVID-19 is not the only virus playing its deadly cards today. Precisely the Chinese province of Hubei is now preoccupied with yet another outbreak, now of what is called African Swine Fever Virus (ASFV). This is a viral strain that very quickly kills pigs, wild and domestic, with catastrophic consequences for pig farming economies and ecologies in Asia, and potentially in Europe as well. ASFV does not kill humans, but it gets out of control very easily when humans are in trouble. In Hubei, the COVID-19 quarantine has been limiting the mobility of the veterinary staff that controls the ASFV, of which wild boars are an important vector of transmission. There is an interplay between ASFV and COVID 19, as there are crucial interplays between humans, wild boars and domestic pigs.

I argue that the viral multispecies intertwinements of the current pandemic will

lead us to rethink the ways we want to 'attune' our human bodies to the bodies of others-animals in the future (Despret 2004). For instance, it is said that COVID-19, as Ebola and HIV/AIDS, came into human bodies through zoonotic transmission. Zoonosis is the process by which a disease is passed form the body of an animal to the body of a human, yet it has also the reverse dynamics of transmission (Lainé 2018).

We are all now aware of and concerned with zoonosis.

Edward Holmes, a virologist who is tracing the human-pangolin zoonoses of COVID-19 has already noted that one lesson of this pandemic should be the need to reduce human's self-exposure to wildlife. Indeed, after COVID-19, many will fear that 'with all human-animal coexistence being subsumed under the sign of the "coming plague", every human-animal interaction becomes a potential pandemic ground zero' (Keck and Lynteris 2018: n.p.).

Today I wonder: how will the aftermath of COVID-19 transform my field-site, where humans and wild boars engage in quite intimate ways? I had recently a conversation with Gregorio Mentaberre, a veterinary scientist from the Wildlife Ecology and Health Group (Autonomous University of Barcelona). He speculates that the movement of wild boars into the city—now enhanced by the current human quarantine— could increase the presence of tics and pathogens such as enterobacteriaceae in urban parks and green areas. Will this lead to human-wild boar 'social distancing' in the future? Will humans become more cautious about zoonotic transmission of coronaviruses, ASFV and other pathogens? What I tentatively call the emergence of 'viralscapes' denotes the rendering visible—or imaginable— the corporeal multispecies sceneries in which viruses circulate. These inter-corporeal sceneries or 'scapes' are now becoming widely 'represented' in the media, turning the microbial live of human and nonhuman others into a social concern. COVID-19 is certainly bringing some inter-corporeal microbial relations to the fore, but how will the viralscapes that we all now start to see and feel impact on particular interspecies relational habits is yet to be

seen.

Wild boars and people close distances in Barcelona. Foto: Aníbal Arregui

I write this commentary from a concerned home confinement, yet with the hopeful sight towards new forms human life and multispecies coexistence 'after' COVID-19. I also see that the work of anthropology, history and other social sciences and humanities is in times of crises more important than ever. Some insights coming from that angle of sciences will be crucial in repositioning humans within the rapidly emerging multi-specific viralscapes of our times. We can for example observe how previous plagues have been imagined, rendered visible and socially addressed (Lynteris 2019). Or we may take inspiration from the reversible violence between species in the context of hunting, and thus understand the task of virology as that of 'chasing' beings that can at any moment strike back and kill us as well (Keck 2018).

Since viruses are wild beings and their wild niche is our bodies, we will need to

> *hunt inside us. And we will need to respect the viruses just as hunters respect the potentially reversible, deadly agency of their prey.*

Hunters are not lonely predators. They act in coordination with a collective of other-than-humans whose interplays in a given environment need to be well known. The first thing hunters recognise is that most of their other-than-human allies and enemies are 'wild', i.e. autonomous and non-domesticable as species. This fosters a bodily attentiveness and affection towards others that front-stages respect, something quite different from relying on the submission and obedience of those whose autonomy has been co-opted by technoscience.

Likewise, I would argue that it is not possible to position ourselves safely within the viralscapes we share with others without knowing and respecting their open-ended, autonomous, microbiome-level interactions. There is an emerging branch of virology that studies what they call the 'social live of viruses' (Dolgin 2019). These specialists study the communication and coordination between different strains of viruses which ally to jointly conquer an organism. From a social science multispecies perspective, I suggest that in order to map these microbial 'social' dynamics, we need to not only know how viruses interact biologically, but also how human-human and human-nonhuman bodily engagements reshuffle viral relations themselves in unpredictable ways.

The balance that allows for human life within the emerging viralscapes is a project that necessarily involves to rethink *collectively* our relation to other-than-humans. Of course we as individuals need to know the bodies and affects of others to prevent situations of pathogenic zoonosis, and the later contagion and propagation between humans. But this does not necessarily enshrine the celebrated 'distancing' once and for all. It also involves care, respect, and humility towards others. The individual modelling of 'distancing' is being rapidly put into practice to prevent transmission between humans, and some are claiming or applying this distance to animals as well.

A cautious, temporary distancing might be now vitally necessary. But it cannot

settle as a relational or cultural status quo. We have seen in the last weeks the emergence of disgusting, virally driven forms of racism and ‘othering’. First, ‘unhygienic’ Chinese individuals were blamed for COVID-19 spread. Then the ‘grabby’ Italians. Soon after, stereotyped Spanish practices of indiscriminate kissing in greeting could well be indicted next. To combat this, a full set of body techniques (Mauss 1968) of hygiene and ‘social distancing’ has been imposed at an unprecedented scale: a planetary anatomo-political discipline. Just imagine Michael Foucault waking up right now and seeing this mess. And now imagine how *he* would imagine the complex interplay of COVID-19 and that other virus that took him away: HIV/AIDS.

> *The point I wish to make is that it does not matter whether you are a Chinese or an American person, a pangolin or a wild boar.*

Amid today’s rapidly evolving viralscapes, our bodies are, inevitably, the bodies of others. Never has the permeability of individuals’ bodies been as dramatically evident as it is in the current pandemic. And yet, the irruption of COVID-19 does not reveal that we were too close to each other. It shows we didn’t foresee the danger of the radical porosity of our shared bodies. We didn’t predict how wildness could play outside, inside, and between us. Even if ‘distance’ can become a conduit for ignorance, carelessness or racism, for many this pandemic will be the revelation that we are vitally enmeshed.

This is why self-discipline, body techniques of hygiene and social distancing cannot be the telos of this moment for humanity. We all know—or hope—this is only a temporary, short-term solution. Humans and other-than-humans will soon restart to navigate the interrupted individual distances. Therefore, the emergence COVID-19 may be an opportunity to rethink the system that inevitably binds us as a multi-species collective, not as human individuals. Several voices are already pointing in that direction, for instance recalling the economic destructive logics that prevented us from stopping the propagation of COVID-19 timely (e.g. Staal 2020).

In any case, we have now a total system failure that has become a somatic issue for almost all humans in the world. But this is not a human quarrel against COVID-19 as a species, or a strain of virus. This is a moment to rethink our position in the viralscapes in which COVID-19 is chasing us back, while at the same time it weaves silent connections with ASFV, HIV/AIDS, and who knows what other invisible monsters. So far, COVID-19 and its peers are telling us they will remain wild, and even if we tame some of them with an eventual vaccine, they will keep mutating, allying, and coming back through our ubiquitous human and other-than-human bodies.

> *We see now the somatic multispecies forest we live in, and we cannot domesticate it.*

We can only show respect for the wild bodies that circulate among and within us, and accept uncertainty. This is something at which hunters are much better than scientists.

This thread is part of the ongoing Corona thread on Allegra.

Acknowledgments

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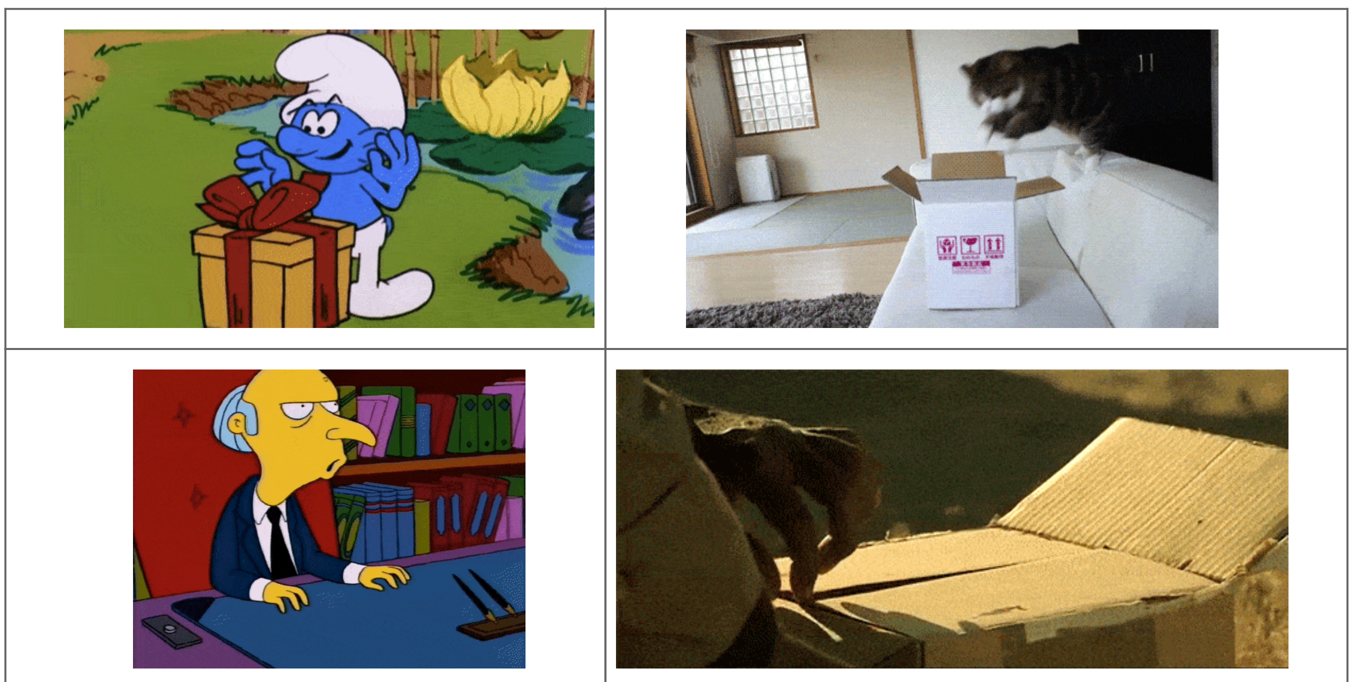
Un/boxing Fulfillment: A Field Guide to Logistical Worlds

Julie Y. Chu
March, 2020

In the classic origin tale of "The Box" and its seductions, Pandora is driven by curiosity—a distinctly feminized will to knowledge—to unleash chaos on mankind, her founding act of unboxing scrambling the prior all-male world of utopic humans now plunged into a darker reality where misery, pestilence, etc. roam.

With a name meaning “gift” or “giver,” Pandora herself is an assembled product—a customized, poisoned gift of the gods—engineered to lure men into receiving a mysteriously new package delivered directly to their home: the desirable and desiring Figure-With-The-Box. The act of receiving the gods’ delivery, like the act of unboxing, promises some kind of fulfillment. But that promise is ultimately dashed and out of reach. When Pandora gets around to closing the lid on the havoc she’s released, she finds that in lieu of any satisfaction of her original curiosity-cum-desire there is only hope lingering in the emptied space where chaos had burst forth and escaped. In the end, hope, along with chaos, recast the seductions of The Box and its unboxing as a curious, if opaque, dream of “fulfillment”—as something constantly displaced and deferred in the movement from delivery to receiving, packaging to un/boxing.

What’s in The Box?



Since the origin myth of Pandora, the dark seductions of The Box continue to be the stuff of pop culture ruminations (not to mention academic fascination a la

Latour 1987, 1999); its alluring packaging and surface opacity, its call to the risqué pleasures of the hidden and the unknown, perhaps best captured by the now viral and meme-worthy question: What's in the Box? The answer, whether in the form of cartoon characters, internet cats or horror films, tells the same story: there is anticipation and often surprise in the act of unboxing. Shock. Laughter. Sometimes horror too. But fulfilment is, at best, fleeting. It is almost always somewhere else, the deferred some-*thing* goading you into the next act of unboxing.

Fulfillment. The Oxford dictionary tells us that there are four distinct senses of this term. The first two refer to the act of doing what was hoped for and expected (definition #1) or what is required and necessary (#2). Definition #3 describes the feeling of being satisfied and happy with what you are doing and have done. Then there is the fourth and most novel definition, which recast "fulfillment" in the distinct commoditized terms of the logistics industry: as the act of packing and sending something that the customer has ordered.

Fulfillment is the operating principle by which the world's foremost logistics and e-commerce corporation, Amazon, stakes its vision as "the earth's most customer-centric company."

The Amazon Box with its distinctive smiling arrow is the icon of this dream of fulfillment; its recurring images of delivery and receipt, packaging and unboxing conjuring the very "magic" of FBA—Fulfillment By Amazon, its branded logistics product for sale. Like Marx's wooden table which comes magically alive as commodity fetish and dances on its head, the Amazon Box not only smiles, it

acquires a persona and a body as FBA (i.e., logistics as *the* commodity), singing as well as dancing its way, en route, to the dream of “Fulfillment.”

But sometimes the dream of Fulfilment animates the dark side of The Box, the hidden and unleashed chaos shadowing the hope of “the order”—the customer-centric desire of on-demand purchase-and-delivery—now reimagined as a game of creepy ambiguity (Amazon Roblox) or outright dystopic exchange (What the Box?).

Scholars of what is sometimes tagged “the Logistics Revolution” often hearken back to a different Box as the game-changing vessel in promoting the globalizing dream of Fulfillment: the standardized shipping container (Levinson 2016, Klose 2015). Innovated in the mid-20th century, the container is both modular device and model for reformatting space-time from a world of architectural “volume” to operational “network,” from territorial “figures” to procedural “flows” (Lyster 2016: 1-3). Increasingly, the container is also a metaphor for other design projects, so that we might describe a certain kind of architecture, computer program or business model as operating “like a transport container” (Klose 2015: 56). In this case, the container as *The* Box marks not just the fetish of “network” and “flow” designs but moreover, its transductive value as a mediator of inputs and outputs or more broadly, as “a general metaphor for all things fillable and evacuable” (Klose 2015: 81).

This key containerized dynamic of fillable and evacuable "flows" can also work recursively; that is, in so far as The BOX itself is scalable, it can be variously packed within other containers as in the classic nesting design of Russian Matryoshka dolls (Klose 2015: 68-9). Indeed, more than just capturing "flows," the Matryoshka principle of the-box-within-boxes has itself become a design model for recasting all kinds of businesses and information systems according to the logistical values of "interoperability," "resilience" and "optimization" in a global economy ever attached to the fantasy of "seamless" circulation.

Yet in the space-time between boxing up and unboxing the flow of things (and their related flows of transport and information), there remain dark gaps and sutured zones that haunt the dream of Fulfillment and in turn, invite other possibilities for living and thinking outside The Box.

In what follows, we offer a field guide to logistical worlds as configured by The Box and its various acts of un/boxing. We attend to the fetish of The Box as well as its unwinding into three distinct, yet related, movements: the processes of (1) boxing up, (2) unboxing and (3) inhabiting the seams (AKA the "/" in un/boxing) in logistical landscapes aspiring for ever more efficient and magical "seamless" flows (Vertesi 2014).

Choose your route to Fulfillment. Scan (click) a box below:

Seeing Like a Scanner
The Box Is a Variable
Seams as Groundwork
The Box Is an Event
Jarring Expectations
Fulfillable?

Seeing Like a Scanner

By Kenzell Huggins

Cardboard boxes, and the products they are meant to hold, are covered in black lines and dots. These tend to be on one surface of the box, accompanied by alphanumeric combinations that are interpretable to English speakers familiar with the genre of American mail delivery systems: a name, Julie Chu; a weight, 1.2 Lbs; an address, 1126 E 59th ST, University of Chicago Dept of Anthropology…and so on. From just this alphanumeric portion of the graphic artifice along with the requisite knowledge and maps, a human should be able to deliver the package to a location. Yet humans do not accomplish the work alone, and that is why alphanumeric graphics are yet more arcane symbols in codes uninterpretable to the average human.

Those black lines and dots form barcodes (one-dimensional) and matrix codes (two-dimensional).

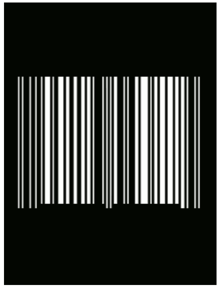
These codes are combinations of inputs which make the package legible to a computerized system. To interact with these barcodes and the computer-managed logistical system simultaneously, humans need to utilize scanning devices. Within every step of the fulfillment process, from warehouse to doorstep, the scanner not only attends to the package but also the human laborer. Hence, the scanner is the tool that also makes the human laborers legible within the computerized logistics process; depending on the organization, watch for how scanners track each worker as they clock in and out of the device, track what packages they've handle, or track their movement through the space of the warehouse or the city. The barcode thus boxes the material form of the packaged commodity into an electrical data package to be stored in yet another box, the server within the data center.

But for now, let's note the modes of attending to scanners themselves. The form of the scanner emerges from the interplay of desires for standardization of the barcode against desires for scanners to be versatile and work across a range of barcode symbologies. One could consider the versatility of the scanning technology as a margin of indeterminacy that modulates how the scanner can interact with other technical systems and human beings. Most scanners either work by using light (laser or infrared) to reflect the sequence of light and dark spaces back into the scanner–the cheapest method, still used in retail settings. Otherwise, scanners use a camera to capture a digital image of the code and interpret the pattern with reference to a symbology using a particular software–the method most quickly expanding into everyday use with smartphones and QR codes. Often, the code needs to be aligned in a specific orientation in order to be readable, but some symbologies and softwares are designed to be

readable in any orientation. These are usually matrix codes.

Long before one sees light from a scanner, one might encounter the characteristic noise of the scanner. The familiar metronomic ambient noise of American grocery store lines serves as auditory confirmation that the package has been registered by the system for both the worker and the consumer. Within warehouses, such noises provide the rhythm of labor, providing the grooves that help workers recognize if they are setting a pace to hit target times. Attending to the sensory array of visual and audio cues, *learning to see like a scanner*, is essential for approaching and remixing the vital seam of scanning in modern logistics practices.

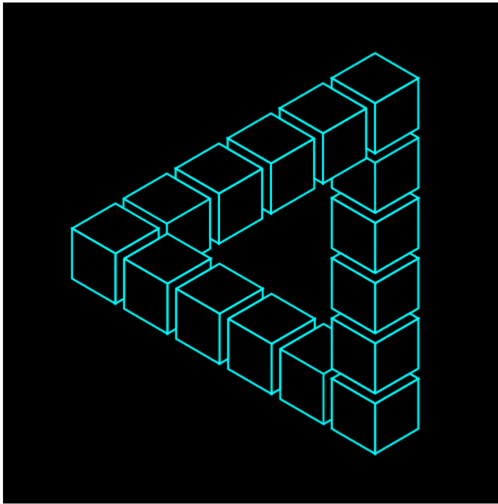
Choose the next route to Fulfillment:



The Box is a Variable

By Jack Mullee

In a logistical flow, a box is a kind of variable. More accurately, the box is an active variable-maker. It transforms the some-thing inside into a specific variable that "speaks" in the context of a supply-chain formula. Another way of putting this is to say that the box *translates* on behalf of its contents. The thing-inside cannot speak to the supply chain (a la Mitchell 2002, "Can the mosquito speak?") but the box can. Through its label, the box speaks and is heard in the languages of a flat, networked world. The ensuing communiques are sent intermittently from the box to a distant computer server, where the box is always recognized as a variable in a double-sense. It is a concrete thing roving from node to node, and it is a piece of code, fixed in server space but varying in "value" as its cardboard counterpart moves.

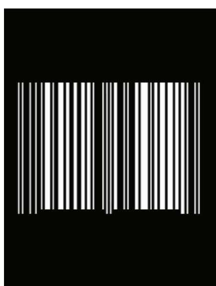


Data center magic. *Gif source*, *Audio source*

Somewhere, on a server, likely in a faraway data center, the movements of the box will be registered as it passes under scanners and through ports. Both the box and the data it generates "concretely exist", as Robinson admits of the programmer's variable, as well. Algorithms and variables "are implemented on a computer, which means they must concretely exist in a computer's memory", he writes (2008, p.260). Hence not only is the *box qua variable* concrete, but so also is the data that represents the box's location to a supply chain manager. In other words, the logistics of fulfillment depends upon (at least) two types of concrete variables, each of which operates as a condition of fulfillment: one a cardboard box, and the other an electronic datum. Each of these variables is always "situated in a particular place", and each such place has its politics, its controversies and its contradictions. The magic of the *box qua variable* is precisely its ability to appear on the recipient's doorstep without recalling any such places or politics.

“A variable is a box stripped of sides, top, and bottom, abstracted away from geometry and physics, of no especial size or shape or color nor situated — so far as the programmer who conjures it needs to know or worry about — in any particular place.” – Derek Robinson (2008, p. 260)

Choose the next route to Fulfillment:



Seams as Groundwork

By Julie Chu

Prairie Ambient recording by Julie Chu.

20,283 acres. 30 square miles.

That is the size of the largest nationally protected space of “Chicago Wilderness” where we found ourselves listening to the call of birds while wandering along a gravelled trail amidst restored prairielands. Situated about an hour’s drive from the city proper, the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie was established in 1996 with the vision of reconnecting people in Illinois, “The Prairie State,” with the pristine signs of their “prairie past,” including “the chance to view bison in their native habitat” (National Foundation Forest 2011: 1-5). But it was not bison that we glimpsed clustered in some “habitat” in the near distance. Carried along the swaying breeze with the mix of birdsong, the industrial churn of the orange cranes moving shipping containers between rail and road traffic signaled another soundscape (play audio above), another space-time: the logistical world of on-demand commerce abutting against and *interpenetrating* this landscape of recently restored “nature.”

6,400 acres. 15 million square feet of real estate.

That is the available space for commercial development at CenterPoint Intermodal Center, the largest logistics park in Chicagoland situated next to Midewin in Joliet/Elwood, which happens to be the largest inland port in the Northern Hemisphere. The orange cranes in the backdrop of the prairieland belong to CenterPoint’s neighbor, the BNSF Logistics Park, another intermodal

facility for moving containers between railroads and trucking routes, and in and out of the more than half a billion square feet of warehouse sortation, distribution and delivery centers dotting Chicago's key interstate highways (AKA "logistics corridors") from the outer suburbs of Will and Dupage Counties into the city proper in Cook County.

Both Midewin and CenterPoint emerged out of the post-Cold War 1990s as part of the decommissioning and privatizing breakup of the 40,000-acre Joliet Army Ammunition Plant which was once the largest manufacturer of military explosives in the world. En route to CenterPoint and along our hike through Midewin, you can see some of the material remnants of this earlier military-industrial logistics network: the last bits of rusting rail tracks that once moved over one billion pounds of TNT from the munitions factory in the Chicago prairielands onto the Army cargo trucks and roads across the country and then into the various air and ground campaigns overseas from World War II to Korea and Vietnam and into the first Gulf War.

In our various treks between Chicago, the city proper, and the exurban port area of Joliet/Elwood, the seams across nature/military/commerce became routine zones of ethnographic encounter. Their murky ground of mixed use and sensory disorder repeatedly called our attention to the persistence of prior logistical worlds: old rail lines delivering bombs and dressed meat crisscross and sit alongside the even older canal network that once moved grain, ice and timber; the canals run alongside the prior riverine routes of indigenous exchange and later, the settler-colonial fur trade; and laminated on top of all these overlapping infrastructures, a key fiber optic cable of Chicago's internet backbone now tracks alongside the concrete expanse of I-55—one of the city's main interstate highways and "logistics corridors" running from Lake Michigan and downtown Chicago to Joliet/Elwood and beyond.

Seams Tour video by Julie Chu.

On the ground in the town of Elwood where the prairieland and the intermodal centers intersect, you can reminisce with an old foreman of one of the munitions factory waxing nostalgic about the state-of-the-art logistical network of making and distributing bombs—its 10,000 full-time blue collar jobs now replaced by mostly insecure, temporary laborers boxing or delivering goods out of one of the many warehouse distribution centers. You can take in the cranes in Midewin's horizon while chatting with a local prairieland promoter who grumbles about the ever-expanding footprint of intermodal centers and their diesel-spewing fleets of cargo trucks barreling down residential streets not designed to bear such heavy and dangerous traffic. And you can take in the grandiose yet forlorn sight of the new-ish townhall of Elwood, somewhat ironically dubbed the "Taj-Mahal" now that the town has found itself $30 million in debt after handing out tax rebates to attract CenterPoint and other logistics-related businesses to come and usher in a promised boom in new tax-paying jobs and other revenue generators that has yet to materialize (cf. Sammon 2019).

> *But the logistics industry does not take in the sights and sounds of its effects (and affects) from the ground. They work the ground and its seams from the panoramic view above.*

Logistical space is landscape smoothed over from a bird's eye view to take in the larger checkerboard of intersecting lines and boxable sites that can be optimized

for “immense cost savings” and “unmatched connectivity” (as CenterPoint puts it above…). Surveyed from the air, the ground is reworked as gridded territory and geographic datapoint for projecting market share through the optimized distribution of storage, sorting and delivery locations; to make calculable patterns of traffic flow and efficient interchange across water, rail and roads as well as of population growth and relative density in movements between (urbanized) centers of consumption and (exurban) “corridors” of logistical warehousing and transport labor. First pioneered by Walmart’s founder, Sam Walton, who regularly took to the sky in his own private plane in order to plot out his expanding network of “distribution centers” (LeCavlier 2016), this logistical remaking of the ground has intensified even more under the recent dominance of Amazon with its rapidly expanding footprint of warehouse “fulfillment centers” and branded delivery fleets of Amazon “Flex” drivers and subcontracted “Delivery Service Partners.” Starting with two fulfillment centers in 1997 encompassing 93,000 square feet in Seattle and 202,000 square feet in Delaware, Amazon now occupies over 170 million square feet of warehousing space in the U.S. with a network of 500-plus facilities across 35 states and with 132 more sites planned for the near future (see MWVPL International 2020). In Will County alone, where the port of Joliet/Elwood is situated near Chicago, Amazon has gone from zero presence in 2015—when it launched its two-hour delivery program, Prime Now—to becoming the county’s single largest employer in 2017 (and in the process, replacing Walmart for the title).

Click to explore Amazon in Chicagoland map.

Logistical space aspires for “seamless” flows by — counterintuitively — drawing *seams* between two distinct zones of circulation. On the one hand, it recasts the exurbs as the staging grounds for sorting, boxing and distributing goods in and

out of massive million square-feet warehouses via giant cargo trucks. On the other, it dots the urban core with smaller delivery stations and more nimble vans for maneuvering through dense city traffic in the final leg of getting The Box to the customer's doorstep (AKA "last mile" logistics).

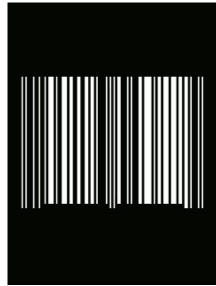
Indeed, seams are integral to the design of The Box. They work recursively, *fractally*, across logistical worlds in the quest for "unmatched connectivity" in the relay of flows (cf. Irvine and Gal 2000). Yet where there are seams, there are also possibilities for rupture and leakage.

Between the online click of your purchase and the arrival of The Box on your doorstep, sometimes packages can get lost while traversing the seams of inbound/outbound across the fulfillment center and the delivery station. The Box may arrive with its taped edges or sides split open, its contents scrambled or spilling out. And even when The Box comes as expected right on "Prime" Amazon time, you might still be in for a rude surprise as more than one customer discovered when faced with the leaky traces of waste management inherent to the ground game of "seamless" delivery.

The box waste of cardboard and various plastics routinely stack up on both ends of inbound and outbound processing through warehouses, not to mention, at customers' homes. Belching trucks along logistics corridors thicken the air with noise pollution and diesel fumes. Then there are the "last mile" drivers, often operating under intense algorithmically managed pressures to forgo bathroom breaks to meet speedy delivery quotas. Sometimes these drivers resort to peeing into bottles while racing to meet their delivery targets and when all else fails, relieve themselves on any expedient corner along their routes. In several public scandals, some have even been caught on video by unhappy customers, who found more than The Box left at their home.

Warehouse workers, long-haul truck drivers and last-mile package handlers enjoy only a finite number of paid sick and vacation days per year. As the continuity of everyday life becomes increasingly contingent on the deliverability of The Box, feverish delivery workers are pressured to keep working the seams.

Choose the next route to Fulfillment:



The Box is an Event

By Harini Kumar

Two million square feet. This is the size of Amazon's largest Box. Inside it are thousands of commodities, hundreds of "amazonians" (Amazon workers or associates), and a system devised to ensure that the dozen toilet paper rolls you ordered yesterday is packaged and delivered at your doorstep today. This Box is an Amazon fulfillment center, one out of more than a hundred and seventy-five around the world. Things arrive here from various vendors and are unboxed immediately to begin the process of fulfillment. An inconspicuous event this, but another, more glamorous kind of unboxing awaits the restless consumer. But first, the seemingly seamless process of fulfilling *your* request begins.

The fulfillment center is where incoming items are unboxed, stowed, picked, packed, and boxed again for shipping. Yellow railings, yellow bins, yellow arrows—overwhelming bursts of yellow flood these centers, trapped between multiple floors and conveyor belts. Between "pickers" (employees who pick and

sort through commodities for boxing) and scanners, and more boxes. Curious visitors—public tours have been offered at Amazon fulfillment centers since 2015 to make the process more transparent—are guided through this maze, the tour guide hoping to impress upon them the "magic that happens after you click buy", how a commodity is taken to its logical, logistical end, into a box and onward to a fulfillment of another kind.

Scaled down is The Box we're all-too-familiar with, making its way through a logistical chain that we're even more cut off from now than ever before. This cardboard box has undergone a process of testing for its durability even *before* reaching the fulfillment center, and has a life of its own *beyond* the supply chain and delivery world. You can get rich "unboxing".

> *Unboxing no longer means removing something from a box. Unboxing is an event. It is a metaphor for a range of processes and affects.*

If Amazon fulfillment center tours are a kind of unboxing, an act of unraveling the "magic" behind the journey of the box, another (more lucrative and pleasurable) kind of unboxing seduction lies in the virtual world.

YouTube has made unboxing glamorous. Vloggers unbox packages, taking their

time to reveal the prized commodity—a gadget, a toy, an item of clothing, even live animals—while voyeurs weigh in virtually.

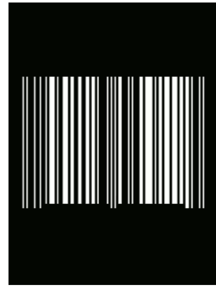
The destination of the logistical supply chain is no longer your doorstep but the digital world, a thriving virtual economy. More than a decade ago, unboxing videos became such a big trend that a YouTube channel, Unbox Therapy, was started in 2010, with daily unboxing video uploads of mostly electronic gadgets. This channel currently has 16.3 million followers. The more theatrical the box and packaging, the more views say digital marketing experts.

The unboxing craze has also led to news headlines such as "Should children watch toy unboxing videos?" and "The bizarre, lucrative world of 'unboxing' videos". As an advertising gimmick to announce their latest ThinkPad, computer giant Lenovo even "hired" a Montana grizzly bear to find and unbox the laptop in a fourteen minute Facebook live video.

As we continue to buy into the myth of magical seamlessness, the sonic and ocular lure of unboxing only gets more thrilling and creative, and all the more absurd, keeping us firmly glued to our screens. But there is one more sensory experience that's gained frightening significance recently. As the world deals with tactility (don't touch your face!) in forever changed ways, new anxieties around touching everyday surfaces abound. With a rapidly spreading infectious disease capable of living on cardboard for at least twenty-four hours (and other surfaces

for much longer), the ordinary, ubiquitous box—passing through multiple hands before reaching you—may no longer be an object of huggable affection but something to be treated with caution and disinfectant wipes, ironically one of the most ordered items on Amazon right now.

Choose the next route to Fulfillment:



Jarring Expectations

By Heangjin Park

When you open the Amazon box, take out the air cushions and bubble wrap, then you will finally see the jar of kimchi from South Korea that you ordered. It is the jar shown on the product's page on the Amazon website (or app). It is what Amazon promised to deliver; what boxes, air cushions, and bubble wrap—which, from a consumer's point of view, seem unnecessarily large and excessive—are intended to protect, and what all the barcodes and numbers on the box signify. Yet the jar is layered with a very flimsy plastic paper, which seals the bottle completely. It is filled with pictures and texts, barely leaving any space on it. Some of the information on this layer is mandatory for customs clearance and retail sales in the United States. Still, much of it is for marketing purposes, being intended to appeal to potential consumers of kimchi outside Korea. This package on the jar, designed by the South Korean kimchi manufacturer, shows what the manufacturer wants to explain about their kimchi product and how they think about foreign consumers of kimchi, including those who would buy kimchi from Amazon.

Textual information on the jar is in three different languages, but none of it is a matching translation of the information in another language.

English words suggest that kimchi in the bottle is not too spicy and suits demands for healthy vegan dietary. Information in Korean is carefully curated to emphasize the South Korean origin of the kimchi. Product name in Mandarin also signals “Koreanness,” but to distinguish it from Chinese style kimchi/pickle. The configuration of multi-language information on a little kimchi jar shows how the South Korean manufacturer compartmentalizes their American consumers, speculates on the expectations of each group, and diversifies their marketing strategies using various languages.

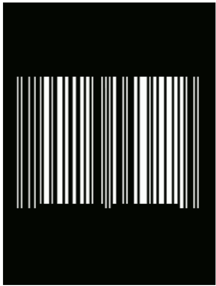
Click to view slideshow of kimchi jar detail. Photos by Heangjin Park.

Do their marketing strategies work? Some Amazon reviews show that people buy jarred kimchi from Amazon because they live in areas where they cannot find any local stores that sell kimchi. Very few seem to notice that the jarred kimchi is from South Korea, or at least not many care about it. Instead, many Amazon reviewers compare the jarred kimchi with other kimchi (un)available in their local settings. Some find consolation that it is still better than worse alternatives in their local stores. For some, it only aggravates the pain of not living near Asian groceries where they could find “spicy, authentic, and fresh” kimchi.

Click to view slideshow of Amazon customer review highlights.

Amazon’s digital-logistical network brokers between South Korean kimchi manufacturer’s aspiration to reach foreign markets beyond its national/ethnic boundaries and American consumers’ desires to reach exotic/cultural commodities that are unavailable in their local settings. The mediation, nevertheless, is far from being seamless. Amazon’s digital platform, which enables consumers to navigate the pictures of jarred kimchi in their homes, might render the distance between producers and consumers less noticeable. Still, disjunctures in desires and expectations remain uncompromising, due to the distance maintained and managed by Amazon’s digital-logistical networks. When consumers open the Amazon box, take out air cushions and then the bubble wrap, they finally face the jar they saw on the Amazon webpage. But with a “POP,” the jar opens, they smell dissonance, and taste a jumble of expectation and disappointment.

Choose the next route to Fulfillment:



Fulfillable?

Like Pandora's Box — promising fulfillment but delivering the ambivalence of hope and chaos — today's box teeters along the double-edged seams of 21st-century logistical worlds. This point has been driven home with terrifying speed in the context of the novel coronavirus pandemic. As *Un/boxing Fulfillment* goes to press (so to speak), SARS-CoV-2 has profoundly disrupted everyday life in the United States and around the globe. The flat, networked world that just weeks ago was busily promising fulfillment is today the mise-en-scene of endemic dystopias and narratives of collapsing healthcare systems.

> *The "magic" of fulfillment blurs now with the "uncertainty" of an unfolding pandemic.*

The virus moves not unlike the box, piggybacking alongside tourists, migrants, laborers and highly mobile elites. But it does not announce its whereabouts, at least not on simple command, like the box; instead, doctors and epidemiologists are "flying blind through a pandemic" as testing capabilities lag behind the movements of COVID-19. Meanwhile, the very same just-in-time (JIT) production principles that have long undergirded Amazon's spectacular feats of delivery are

partially to blame for [emerging shortages of hospital beds, ventilators and face masks](), as healthcare systems worldwide have reduced beds and other supplies in pursuit of "lean" management practices in recent years. From start to finish, the global coronavirus crisis is intimately bound up with our logistical ways of life.

For years, the box has been chattering to and through scanners, geographic zones, supply chains, memes and customer desires. In recent weeks, chaos has been unleashed along the very same circuits as those traveled by the box. What then might the box still have to say in this moment of [deep unease and delayed/disrupted fulfillment]()?

Fulfillable? (2020) by Heangjin Park.

Choose the next route to Fulfillment (?):

Acknowledgements

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Eerie desires for the authoritarian state. Covid-19 updates from Italy.

Letizia Bonanno
March, 2020

I have been – like anyone else in Italy – in quarantine for the past three weeks. Optimistically, Italy will be on lockdown for the next two weeks as well; realistically it might well be for many more. The Covid-19 emergency started escalating on 7 March 2020 and has unfolded through the prime minister Giuseppe Conte's murky public announcements, all made late at night. For two weeks now, almost every morning we have woken up to even stricter rules, the latest forbidding even solitary strolls and runs in the park. We have been confined at home and told that social isolation is an act of social responsibility and solidarity. It is an act of respect towards the medical personnel working relentlessly, and an act of care towards the most vulnerable population, the elderly, the immunosuppressed and those with underlying medical conditions.

This short piece is an improvised inquiry into some Italians' eerie yearning for more state control and repressive measures. Unlike the refugee crisis, the

austerity measures and environmental collapse which have affected some while leaving others either untouched or just indifferent, the Covid-19 crisis is now out to get us all. Whereas the past decade witnessed the success of party politics based on fear mongering, today political leaders are banking on those internalised fears. However, the current socio-economic insecurity and unprecedented health risks that Covid-19 poses to all are reconfiguring the relations between neoliberalism and authoritarianism, while breeding many Italians' desires for a strong man in power.

In Italy, as well as in France, the pandemic emergency narrative has disproportionately grown out of war metaphors: from 'the medical personnel is fighting a battle against time and an invisible enemy' to 'now we are at war', warfare has provided words, concepts and ideological background to talk about today's Covid-19 crisis. While Michel Foucault (2001, 2003) has extensively unravelled the dangerous liaison between biomedicine and politics, Susan Sontag's *Illness as metaphor* (1978) offers a thoughtful critique of the distortions which follow the extension of illness images in more grandiose schemes of warfare. Covid-19 is the fierce enemy against which we – individually and collectively – must wage war. The costs of this war will be high indeed, but citizens must be willing to *sacrifice*: giving up individual freedom today for the collective benefit, and for greater freedom tomorrow. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's *Manifesto of Futurism* (1909) provides an unexpected impetus to read today's warfare metaphors and the risk of contagion: war is the means to sanitise the nation and ultimately ensures hygiene. With no apparent hesitation, many Italians have embraced the war metaphor and recoded it in cheap patriotic appeals: 'Our grandparents were asked to go fighting World Wars I and II. We are just asked to fight this war staying home.'

> *As much as washing hands figures as a crucial measure for the prevention of contagion, it seems reasonable to conclude that more than one hundred years later, war and hygiene are still what it takes to protect society.*

Despite the strict lockdown measures, in some Italian cities people are still being caught wandering through the streets, walking their dogs too far away from their homes, hoarding supplies from supermarkets, engaging in behaviours that would have been unremarkable until a few weeks ago, but are now classified as antisocial. The army – the prime minister has recently warned – might come out onto those streets that have already been patrolled by cops for weeks: if Italians cannot cope with simple rules (stay home; don't go out unless it's necessary), the army will *help* them comply. And a fascinating switch occurs here, which, I think, speaks to and pushes further Stef Jansen's (2014) take on people's *hope for and against the state*. It is no longer the state alone attempting an *authoritarian turn*, it is a growing number of citizens dreaming and asking – finally out loud – for *the strong man in power.* In the face of the threat that the pandemic poses to both individual health, and society as a whole, people's yearning for *the strong man in power* is more than an attempt at non-evading the state's grids that Jansen (2014) records in besieged Sarajevo. All the same, Italians' outcry for strong leadership also falls far beyond the principles of the Hobbesian Leviathan: the state is not invoked to maintain the social contract, but rather to protect individual rights to health which are no longer safeguarded.

The argument underlying such desires grows out of national stereotypes that Italians seem to have embraced as well as some historical 'fake news', such as 'We, Italians, never abide by the rules but *he* would have known how to make people respect them.' *He* stands for Benito Mussolini. He lost the war, yet he knew how to enforce war measures, cut down on people's liberties and created a police state where democratic rule was (had to be!) suspended because of the undisciplined behaviour of the population. Italians are like children and children are frequently unruly. Unfortunately, the infantilisation of the population is a recurrent trope in Italian politics. A timely example is offered by the attacks by many male politicians on women's rights to a safe abortion: they say they want to protect us from taking 'wrong' decisions about our bodies and our lives. In the breath-taking film *Investigation of a citizen above suspicion* (1970), Elio Petri magnificently showed how the infantilization of society is an effective tool of

control and repression. In the film, Gian Maria Volonté plays the role of a high-ranking, corrupt, murderous, right-wing police officer who is accorded emergency powers to curb the social protests and unrest that shattered Italy throughout the 1960s and 1970s. His speech ends with a medical diagnosis requiring a political solution**:**

> *'These people are children; the city is ill: doctors have the task to cure, we [state officers] must repress [protests]: repression is our vaccine.'*
>
> *('Il popolo è un minorenne; la città è malata: c'è a chi spetta il compito di curare, a noi spetta il dovere di reprimere: la repressione è il nostro vaccino.' [Translation by L.B.])*

Predictably, war metaphors tend to capture – simultaneously invite – a surge in patriotic sentiments and unwieldy desires for an authoritarian state: to win a war, strong leadership must marshal the army and rule over the population. Like a Machiavellian prince, *the strong man in power* is a bold and confident ruler, unafraid to take unpopular decisions for which he is no longer accountable to the people. He knows what is best for them and he knows better than them what they need and deserve.

> *The rise of the strong man to power would definitely seal the transition from a 'nanny state' to a strict 'daddy state'.*

This means a state that gives priority to duties over rights and allocates sanctions over support through the grim rhetoric of the *obligations to citizenship* (Wacquant 2010). I find such gendered signification of the state alarming, indeed as not just male but as *the father*: it is telling of both deeply gendered impacts of its policies and the sexual division of productive and reproductive labour which undergird its rule.

I have always been fascinated by the political and ideological short circuit of the Italian take on individual freedom and the desire for some authoritarian ruler:

how can the mythology of freedom above and beyond any rule fuse with a never-waned desire for *the strong man in power*? In the face of the progressive militarisation of society and the curtailment of liberties, it is legitimate to wonder whether a return to the status quo ante is possible, or whether the current emergency measures mark a point of no return. Any crisis, Janet Roitman (2014) reminds us, can either signal a decisive turning point or become a chronic condition. It can either signify a contingency, a temporal deviation from the norm, or provide a space in which to articulate a critique of the status quo.

> *Amid the Covid-19 crisis, the most optimistic Italians argue that the normality before this crisis was problematic, too, and no one desires a return to that normality.*

Today's crisis has shown the flaws in the system and opened up new margins in which to experiment with practices of solidarity and care: there is hope for change. Others suspect that this authoritarian turn is a point of no-return: now more than ever, Italians seem to want a strong man in power, regardless of whether the enforcement of the authoritarian state and the securitization of borders might come with a drastic restriction of liberties. Some may argue that people's yearnings for authoritarian states boom in times of socio-economic uncertainties. In the thought-provoking article 'Why do we desire our enslavement as if it were our salvation?', Francesco Raparelli (2018) suggests that people's desires for an authoritarian state grow stronger in the very moment they realise that the nation-state as they knew it is falling apart. The disintegration of the welfare system demands a return to the traditional family; the rediscovery of white and colonial supremacy ramps up while women's freedoms are increasingly threatened by male violence and misogynist politics.

What we witness today in Italy is the result of almost ten years of economic austerity, of which the Covid-19 crisis is a manifestation and a continuation. The emergency measures that are mobilised today to face it are menacing re-enactments of the exceptional measures deployed to face the economic crisis ten

years ago. Its impact on Southern Europe is now fully visible: Italian hospitals on the verge of collapse as well as the shortage of medics, medication and other medical supplies result from what has been described as either structural adjustments or efforts to modernize the state. Current draconian measures to contain the contagion blend moral imperatives with political arguments, confuse legitimacy with legality while appealing to people's fear and paranoia towards death. I could read many Italians' desire for a strong man in power as a last desperate attempt to summon a Machiavellian prince; to put the strong man in power who is entrusted with restoring order and granting individual rights and hopes for health, economic stability and justice. However, such reading would just mean to succumb to the urgency of making sense of the present and ignore how people's eerie desires for authoritarian states today are shaping even eerier political futures. In Italy as anywhere else in Europe.

This thread is part of the ongoing Corona thread on Allegra.

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Waiting for a Dam

Matthäus Rest
March, 2020

Once again, in November 2019, I found myself in an SJVN waiting room. But it was a new waiting room. Many things had changed in the two years since my last visit to the Arun valley in Northeast Nepal. Most importantly, after ten years of planning, measuring and assessing, construction work for the Arun-3 hydropower project had started. Also, the developer SJVN – Sutlej Jal Vidyut Nigam, or Sutlej Hydro Power Limited – had taken full possession of the large plot of land close to the airport in Tumlingtar that had been bought by the government of Nepal

during the first attempt to build this dam in the 1990s. Over the past decade, I had visited SJVN offices in Khadbari, Kathmandu, and New Delhi, but this here was something new: a real compound, with high brick walls and a main gate with security personnel. In front of the main gate we ran into three young Indian engineers. Udisha introduced herself as a PhD student working on Indian dam building in Nepal and Bhutan and said that we had come from Kathmandu to talk to one of the executives. One of the engineers, let's call him Manish, called his superior, announced our arrival and asked us inside the compound.

It took Manish half an hour to return. In the meantime, I took pictures of the model of the hydropower plant that was located in the entrance of the building and wondered whether the high walls were connected to several instances when homemade bombs had been planted around the project site over the past years. When the young engineer came back, his face had darkened. He was very sorry, but his superior would not be able to see us because we did not have a written permission from the Investment Board Nepal (IBN). When we replied that indeed we had and showed him text messages from a senior staff member, he became even more obscure. Even if we had a written confirmation by the IBN, he mused, we might also need a document by the Indian embassy confirming our good intentions. "I'm very sorry, but some bad people have come recently. It is very difficult for us." He was clearly uncomfortable throwing us out like this.

I, on the other hand, was surprised. For a decade, I had interacted with SJVN staff on at least a dozen occasions, most times without prior notice. Once, as a first year PhD student, I just walked into their New Delhi office and asked to talk to the head of the international department after three days of unsuccessful attempts to get an appointment by phone. I was handed some tea and asked to wait. My preferred interlocutor was not available because he was on assignment in Bhutan, but after ten minutes, one of his assistants asked me into his office and took an hour to discuss the company's international strategy.

Obviously, something fundamental had changed.

Udisha and I stuck around in this awkward moment for a minute or two, restated our purely academic interest in the dam, but it was clear that Manish had been told to get rid of us and our time inside the compound was over. We asked him to tell his boss he should check back about us with the Investment Board and left our business cards with him. I told him to give us a call if things would change as we would be heading up the valley in any case. “Oh really,” he asked audibly irritated as he walked us back to the main gate, his voice insecure, “you are going up to the dam site?”

The Arun-3 is a peculiar dam: for a whole generation it has refused to materialize. From what we know right now, the project will probably start producing electricity sometime in the mid-2020s. This will be forty years after the project was first proposed in 1984. At the time of its inception, it was a big dam for Nepal, but from the perspective of the World Bank – the lead investor – it was a decidedly unremarkable project. A so-called peaking-run-of-the-river hydropower plant with a 60m dam and 402MW of installed capacity, a 50-hectare storage lake, 300 meters of hydraulic head and an 11km tunnel to divert the water to the turbines. On top of that, initial assessment had indicated little complication concerning social and environmental problems. No villages would be submerged, just a few dozen families would have to be resettled for the access road. But until 1995, when the Bank cancelled its credit negotiations with the government, this unremarkable dam somewhere in a remote valley in the Himalayas had made global news.

Arun-3 had become the symbol of everything that was wrong with the World Bank’s form of international development: environmental degradation, social upheaval, rampant corruption, excessive indebtedness of recipient countries in the global South. In its cancellation, Arun-3 suddenly also became a possible symbol for a new development paradigm.

While the anti-Bank activists in the global North celebrated, Nepal's politicians and their counterparts in the Bank were shell-shocked. The activists in Kathmandu who had started the campaign were unsure what to make of their unexpected victory and whether it would help or hinder their demand for "better" dams. To many people in the Arun valley, once they learned about that decision made in Washington, DC, it was a big disappointment.

> *They understood that without the dam, all the other promises were obsolete: no dam meant no road, no employment, no development.*

Many of those who could afford it had already bet some money on the promise of the dam and had bought land along the two possible routes of the road, hoping to profit from the increase in land value. Almost twenty-three years later, in May 2018, at a luxury hotel in Kathmandu, two men pressed two buttons. Prime ministers Krishna Prasad Oli of Nepal and Narendra Modi of India had remotely laid the foundation stone of the Arun-3 hydropower project. The press pictures showed the model of the dam Udisha and I inspected at the SJVN compound in Tumlingtar.

Two days after our failed meeting in Tumlingtar, Udisha and I reached the construction site near Phyaksinda. Unsurprisingly, the place was hardly recognizable. It had never been much more than a river crossing, just a few houses and some small fields on the left bank of the river, a place for a quick lunch of rice and lentils before a steep climb up either side of the valley. Now all of that was gone. The construction site had taken over the whole valley floor while high above on the other side of the valley, excavators were working on the rock face, dropping shovelful after shovelful maybe 300 metres down into the river. During the last monsoon, we learned from a group of engineers, the Arun River had taken away the lower access road, so they were rebuilding it that way. Udisha struck up a conversation with the engineers who once again were interested in us but unsure who we were and what our purpose was. Normally there was no work on Saturdays, they told us, but they had made an exception that day to remove

excavated material from the main tunnel system. Every few minutes a fully loaded lorry left the construction site on the road uphill towards Num. Most of them had North Indian number plates from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, some were from Bhutan.

Six hours later, on my walk back up to Num, after many conversations at the dam site and the villages around it, I ran into the first local who had actually scored a job in the project. He was working as accountant for the Gujarati company in charge of the electrical engineering. Clearly, he was happy about the dam and the development it would bring to the region. His optimism was very much in line with the stories I had heard over a decade of fieldwork. But now, it seemed, he was in the minority. All the old acquaintances I ran into had a much bleaker outlook.

> *Now that construction had started, most of the promises had vanished into thin air.*

The landowners whose land was crucial to the project had received generous compensation packages, but otherwise nothing was settled. Nobody knew when the so-called “directly affected households” would receive the promised electrification and free electricity. The much anticipated “local shares” – the option to buy stocks of the hydropower company at a subsidized rate for local people – had been delayed to the end of the construction phase. Also the promise of employment for local people and “skills development” was clearly not executed. Even the unskilled labourers were mostly from other parts of Nepal. The most disappointing part of it was, a friend told me, that suddenly the Indian engineers were no longer talking to local civil society leaders. “With the old staff, their office door was always open. But they have all left for India. The new bosses don’t talk.” To him, our expulsion from the SJVN compound thus came as no surprise. I wondered: Is this what going native for an anthropologist of infrastructure feels like?

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Runways to the Sky

Luke Heslop
March, 2020

Road building in the Maldives – an archipelago of small coralline islands – sounds

a bit like a euphemism for a ridiculous task. Maldivian roads present uniquely closed circuits, as they loop around and cross-cut discrete islands on the Indian Ocean archipelago – a location better known not for its connectivity but for the appeal of its isolation. The Republic of Maldives comprises of around two thousand islands (Bell 1940), of which about two hundred are inhabited. Only three roads link up otherwise disconnected islands to form a continuous landscape. Additionally, of the 90,000 square kilometres of national territory of the Republic of Maldives, only three hundred square kilometres is recognised as land (Bremner 2016: 289). The 'real road', some would claim, should be considered as the water that surrounds the islands, with the series of ferry channels between the islands and the atolls as the public road network that the fragmented polity of the Maldives has never fully realised.

> *Instead, roads emerged as dominant as a concrete instantiation of modernity and development on the islands.*

The common Divehi term for development, *thara'gee*, is a relatively new word, with *thara* said by some to derive from the English word tarmac. *Thara'gee* is thus explicitly linked with concrete or asphaltic manifestations of change on the islands (see Heslop and Jeffery, forthcoming).

Roadsides make heterogenous and culturally complex locations for an ethnography of work. For twelve months in the Maldives (April 2016-2017), I worked with a Sri Lankan construction team developing small island roads across the archipelago. The construction company was subcontracted to do the work of a state-owned enterprise called the Maldives Road Development Corporation (MRDC). I spent many days with the work crews on site, mixing and laying asphalt, or in the site office in the capital, Malé, drawing up costings for potential projects and observing outsourcing negotiations to local contractors for smaller parcels of work.

In the construction industry, the uneven insertion of migrant workers into the layered Maldivian labour market could be starkly observed: Bangladeshis labour under the sun with simple tools, Sri Lankans operate machinery in the shade and Maldivians work from air-conditioned offices. Rather than focus on the relationship between workers and the way in which skill and expertise are read at the roadside – about which I have written elsewhere (Heslop and Jeffery 2020), this short essay brings forth some ethnographic reflections on the suspicion of the state and development, a critical population, and the management of infrastructural expectations on an Indian Ocean archipelago.

Suspicion

Suspicions and rumours surrounding substandard work on the islands can be seen in the context of a historical imbalance of development on the archipelago. For many on the more remote islands, Malé is a template for Maldivian infrastructural achievement. However, the advanced status of Malé is also considered a product of a longstanding political project to keep other islands "further behind" – a view that imagines material development is withheld from particular islands, thus leaving them cut off from the infrastructure required to modernise. This view is held particularly strongly in the south of the archipelago. In the late 1950s, the southernmost atolls of Addu, Huvadhu and Fuvahmulah attempted to form a breakaway independent republic, called the United Suvadive Republic. This was quashed by the state under President Ibrahim Nasir, and over subsequent decades these atolls were thought to have been underfunded by the central government, stripped of resources, and cut off from a centralised political powerbase in Malé and the largesse of the state.

> *The sense that governments in power might enact some form of infrastructural revenge on islands in the Addu Atoll was commonplace; both as a result of historical dissent in the region and the sometimes spiteful character of infrastructure politicking that intensified with the arrival of multi-party electoral politics.*

What infrastructural developments a government implemented could be quickly undone by an coming regime that subsequently replaced it. An acute awareness of historical neglect means any proffered infrastructural development is treated with suspicion that it is substandard vis-á-vis infrastructural developments elsewhere on the archipelago.

A broader distrust in the equality of development interventions on other islands is a more common source of suspicion and concern than the idea that an outsourced company is cutting corners for its own gain. However, the latter is not to be ruled out and contractors are, of course, not beyond scrutiny on the islands.

Complaints

When an island resident sees something that they do not like about a newly asphalted road – perhaps a small hole has appeared where a motorcycle stand has been stuck into the ground before the asphalt has had time to set, or perhaps a curb stone is cracked – there is a particular procedure of complaints. A picture of the damage will be taken on a phone and sent via the internet messaging service Viber direct to the local MP, if not the Ministry of Housing and Infrastructure Development. A call will then be made to the contractor's head office in Malé, who will have to reassure the Ministry that work is being done with due diligence and that what has been reported will be taken care of. The national coordinator for the contractor will then tell the local MRDC office to reassure the people on the island from which the complaint originated that it will all be fixed before the contractor leaves. Contra the hierarchical channels of redress observed elsewhere in South Asian politicking, which often start with an appeal to the village head and then, if they are unable to help, a higher authority, the complaints procedure on islands where subcontracted roadwork takes place mainlines straight into political high office with remarkable effect.

The contractor cannot leave, or be paid in full, until all the work at a given site is completed. Complaints generally do not place the contractor of risk of losing the tender, these sorts of complaints are generally filed away as “political grievances” and regarded simply as the opposition party, who may have been against the roadwork in the first instance, causing trouble. Nevertheless, complaints are followed up, and action is often taken. The contractors will not want to be on the island for longer than they need; they certainly do not want to be held back with constantly maintaining the road. A small job, such as a cracked curb stone or a damaged drain cover, would ideally be left until the end when the team can tidy up any loose ends, sign off and go home.

If island residents continued to alert the contractor and the Ministry to damages in need of repair, the contractor would be stuck on site for much longer than is profitable. A loose drain cover is a typical example of the sort of job that contractors would find themselves reluctantly repairing again and again before being able to leave the island. This is also the sort of image that might be sent to the Ministry of Housing and Infrastructure Development.

Distrust towards a contracting company by island residents did not stem from the fact that the contractors were foreigners, or that they were implementing the development plans of government no longer in office, and potentially not one they supported in first instance, but rather that they might not be getting the same quality of roads as other islands.

> *Speculation about unequal development led to questions about the technicality of the process, and competency across the spectrum was interrogated.*

As put to me by one Maldivian roadworks manager:

People are so suspicious… Now the first thing is, nobody knows about the

technicality of the asphalt. What is it? To be honest even the Maldives Road Development Corporation Road and the Housing Ministry don't have the capacity [read: knowledge]. The people in charge of the Ministry, and in charge of this project, they are also politicians, not "technical guys" (Fieldwork interview, Malé, 2017).

Expectations of the local populace regarding what should be built was largely based on what they had seen elsewhere on the archipelago, mainly via television and social media. While state media broadcast utopic animations of roads winding through a high-modernist island metropolis, this does not quite tally with the observable – relatively slow – progress of low-tech construction on the islands undertaken by Bangladeshi labour.

> *Where labour comes from matters. The perceived level of development of the countries from which workers originate also informs how the quality and competence of work is gauged.*

The fabricated animations circulating on social media showing futuristic images of island infrastructure development may have sown seeds of distrust, concern, and suspicion among island residents that what was being done on their islands may not match what was being developed elsewhere, but this was coupled with reports and rumours of developments across the water, from those travelling between the islands and atolls. Speaking of a consultation with island residents, one road manager expressed his bewilderment that such comparisons are made across different atolls:

When we go to the islands, they compare this asphalt with concrete. They believe that it should be that hard, at the mixing and those things should be like concrete. And they might have seen some works in Addu [the southernmost atoll in the Maldives], that is the only place that they might have seen the asphalt works. And they might compare that with this one, and after that, Hulhumalé. Hulhumalé

they have used ABC (aggregate base course) right? As a base layer. But the traffic in Hulhumalé is totally different, the mix ratio is totally different, so they are comparing this with this (Fieldwork interview, September 2018).

While the road manager felt the islanders were making ill-informed and unfair comparisons between different types of roads, it should be noted that these expectations were created in no small part by state propaganda. Nevertheless, the MRDC has faced continued criticism from island residents and local councils. As well as the quality and width of the road, negotiating which routes around the islands are most important to develop falls predictably into the sphere of parochial politics. At the same time, "local issues" can be readily absorbed into national-level politicking, finding relevance in disputes between the Ministry for Environment and the Ministry of Housing and Infrastructure Development – two ministries often at loggerheads as bureaucratic jurisdictions cross-cut in authorizing and implementing work. That the Ministry of Housing and Infrastructure ostensibly requires approval from the Ministry of Environment, by conducting an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) on all developments, was a source of friction between the two Ministries which could see the removal of a single tree rerouting a road.

Laying asphalt over the surface of a coralline island in the Indian Ocean led the same manager to declare, in despair:

> *"Forget the road. They just want something like a runway; a runway to the sky."*

At one level, this comment might reflect the road manager's perception that islanders had overly grand expectations of the roads they would receive. At another, it captures the isolation of these projects and the closed circuit of connectivity that small island roads present. Here, as a "runway to the sky," the expectations of the road might be read through the experiences and places island residents engage with in the process of bringing about a Maldivian *thara'gee* modernity.

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[1] The MRDC was replaced by the state-owned Road Development Corporation (RDC) by Presidential decree in June 2019.

Coronavirus: Less Humanitarianism, More Politics!

Julie Billaud
March, 2020

This essay was written seated on my couch, trying to make sense of the contemporary 'state of emergency' as the world around me has gradually come to a standstill. It argues that imagining the post-COVID19 era requires to move beyond technocratic and humanitarian modes of thinking that neutralize politics in the name of the higher moral ideal of 'saving life' and to re-assert our collective rights for the public good.

(This post is part of Allegra Lab's ongoing #corona thread)

What is striking in the way our governments have articulated their response to the "coronavirus crisis" is the exclusive emphasis on biomedical measures. The state of emergency imposed on us is presented as the most obvious response in exceptional circumstances. In other words, the management of the "crisis" is presented as a mere technical matter. On the one hand, we are made responsible for our own health and the one of others by washing our hands, wearing a mask, remaining confined and maintaining physical distance. On the other, the health of the general population is managed through emergency measures: requisitioning additional reanimation beds, building field hospitals, calling in retired medical staff and medical students for backup.

These dynamics illustrate particularly well a shift examined by Michel Foucault in his reflections on the relationship between knowledge and power which is less visible in more ordinary times: that is to say, a move toward a biopolitical mode of governance that aims to manage human collectivities through statistics, indicators and other measurement tools.

> *Time is running out, we are told, and the end justifies the means.*

We must regain control over life in the collective sense of the word, not over individual human life. See, for example, how the British government has for a moment raised the possibility of "group immunity", accepting to sacrifice the most vulnerable segments of its population, i.e. the elderly, for the benefit of the greatest number. See again how refugees living in camps on the Greek islands are perceived as a biomedical threat that has to be contained. Reduced to polluting matters, they have lost their status as human beings and have become the most evident embodiment of 'bare life', to use Giorgio Agamben's expression. Their isolation is not intended to protect them but rather to protect the local Greek population and the European population in general, from this virus "from abroad". Racial boundaries forged through apparently neutral medical discourses are added to the already highly policed borders of the rich world. Excluding 'others'

(i.e. foreigners) is justified as the only viable means to save 'our lives'. As Mateusz Laszczkowski argues in his post, the 16th century figure of the 'plague-spreader' has been resurrected in the figure of the foreigner as 'virus-carrier'.

But beyond the humanitarian justifications for sorting out the lives to be saved and those to be risked or sacrificed, humanitarian reason tends to neutralise politics and to overlook the deep-rooted reasons for which we find ourselves in such a situation. The increasing importance of moral arguments in political discourses, as Didier Fassin argues, obscures how rules imposed in the name of the preservation of life and the alleviation of suffering are also about power, discipline and surveillance. We live, without any doubt, in the age of 'humanitarian government' where experts, as Judith Beyer puts it in her introduction to this thread, represent the highest moral authority. In the process of making expertise the only valid form of democratic engagement, activities that were previously seen as the provenance of politics and thus subject to public debate have become reduced to matters of techniques. But let's imagine what our situation would look like if health was still considered a public good. Perhaps there would be some room left to critically examine why a humanitarian organization like Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders) decided to launch a COVID-19 mission in France, a country which was considered not that long ago as equipped with one of the best healthcare systems in the world. Perhaps there would be greater opportunities to discuss why medical staff have been turned into self-sacrificing heroes, sent to the 'frontline' without weapons, i.e. without protective masks and gloves, having to risk their lives to save the ones of the contaminated. Maybe we could debate the political priorities to establish once the 'crisis' is over and collectively decide whether financial support should first be channeled toward big corporations (whose economic model has directly contributed to the current catastrophe) or toward the welfare system, so as to contain the long-term human consequences of the crisis.

> *Moving beyond the framework of 'humanitarian emergency' that has become the 'new normal' would certainly enable us to imagine a future where inequalities would no longer be acceptable.*

The coronavirus ‘crisis’ highlights how four decades of neo-liberal policies have destroyed our health systems and, more broadly, diminished our resilience capacities. Over the past weeks, scientists have warned us that research on coronaviruses takes time and resources, and cannot be carried out in a hurry, in stark contrast to the current neoliberal practice of research funding. Health services, already overstretched before the crisis, equally require continuous public support so that they do not have to resort to the cruel triage of lives. Finally, the environment (not profit) must be our top priority at a time when ecosystems essential to life on earth are collapsing.

> *In other words, we need to move away from humanitarian thinking, which provides primarily technical answers, and rethink in political terms the public good, solidarity and social justice.*

(This post is part of Allegra Lab’s ongoing #corona thread)

A shorter version of this text was first published in French in Le Temps

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The Space-Time of Infrastructure

Christine Bichsel
March, 2020

“Lena, you can turn on the camera now.” The view of the space station changes from monitor to film image. The opening scene of Andrei Ujică’s film *Out of the Present* (1997) narrates the arrival of a 35 mm film camera at space station Mir. To the best of our knowledge, this camera is still orbiting Earth (Zielinski 2006: 2). However, Mir, as its original destination and temporary home, is no longer in orbit. The station burst into pieces over the South Pacific Ocean after re-entry into Earth’s atmosphere in 2001. There are other remains of Mir though. The cosmonauts took almost three hundred hours of video footage and sent the tapes back to Earth. Ujică used this footage to tell the story of Sergei Krikalev: the cosmonaut and flight engineer who started his mission in 1991 from the Soviet Union and landed ten months later in independent Kazakhstan. In this article, I explore the representation of Mir in Ujică’s film in order to think through the infrastructure of outer space. I argue that his use of past cinematographic records

challenges the understanding of infrastructure as fixed in space-time.

> *Archives exert a strong gravitational pull on those caught in their orbits.*

After Ujică got hold of the cosmonauts' video, he shut himself up in his apartment in Moscow. The tapes are most extraordinary, belonging to the rare category of objects that have travelled from Earth into space and back again. Moreover, they hold nothing less than the cinematic record of seeing Earth from space. Ujică's immersion in the images created a peculiar sensation: "I had the feeling I was experiencing the flight myself and arrived at the realization that being in space had something elemental about it" (Ujică and Virilio 2003: 62). The sensation of being in space by force of these images must have been very powerful. Ujică kept this detachment from Earth in check by bringing the emerging *Out of the Present* into conversation with the two most influential science-fiction films of the twentieth century: Stanley Kubrik's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972). Science fiction became his only attachment to the world outside the archive (Ujică and Virilio 2003: 69).

Out of the Present directs our gaze firmly towards Earth – as do *Blue Marble* and *Earthrise*, the iconic images produced from Apollo photographs. But Ujică's view of Earth from space is different. This is no longer the famous "god trick" (Haraway 1988) of a disembodied and transcendent gaze from nowhere. Rather, it comes from a hazard-prone metallic insectoid creature with solar panels for wings, marking the apogee of Soviet scientific-technological progress, which hosted humans dubbed cosmonauts by virtue of their ability to survive in outer space.

> *Through the eye of the camera, we experience the cosmonauts' continuous search for Earth-born(e) spatial orientation and share their vertiginous feelings*

> *when looking at Earth from outside the space station.*

The camera presents us with a view far enough from Earth's surface to see its curvature, the thin layer of the atmosphere and the stunning shifts between land, sea and clouds. But not far enough to do away with the feeling of unease about what is going on "down there" at this moment.

Down on Earth, Mir's superstructure is about to collapse. Halfway through the film, a sudden cut takes us from outer space to Earth. It catapults the viewer into the events of August 1991 in Moscow – tanks, crowds, shouting and high anxiety. Only the solitary figure of an artist sits quietly in the street, painting the revolution unfolding before his eyes. He mirrors the eerie calm of the space station, travelling from horizon to horizon above the events.

> *The panoptic view from Mir puts the turmoil in Moscow into perspective – the scope is planetary rather than terrestrial.*

Earlier on, *Out of the Present* narrates the phone call the cosmonauts receive from the president. The switchboard operator confirms that this is Moscow speaking, and announces that Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev is on the line. "What are you doing just now?" asks Gorbachev. The crew answers: "We are getting ready for dinner." Gorbachev laughs and answers: "Oh, if it were a little later, we could have dinner together!" The distance of space allows for a paradoxical intimacy, perhaps creating for Gorbachev a momentary escape from Earth in troubled times.

Mir is not just an outpost of humanity, but also a periphery of Moscow as the

center of Soviet power. A military command structure and thin lifeline connects Mir to the spaceport at Baikonur. Formerly leased from the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic by the Soviet Ministry of Defense, Baikonur became part of newly independent Kazakhstan following the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991. Soon after, the Kazakh government began to lay claims to the spaceport, which remained under Russian control. To accommodate Kazakhstan, the Russian flight direction at Baikonur decided to alter the composition of the relief crew for flight engineer Sergei Krikalev and his colleague. They replaced the scheduled Russian flight engineer with research scientist Toktar Aubakirov, the first ethnic Kazakh in space. Tensions arise in *Out of the Present* when Aubakirov is seen playfully enjoying microgravity with a toy airplane while his colleagues carry out scientific experiments. After a few days, he is ordered to return to Baikonur on the flight scheduled for the relieved crew. Krikalev, however, has to stay on Mir and continue his duties as flight engineer for another six months. Thus, political dealing to secure continued rights to launch from Baikonur clashed with Mir's requirements for technical expertise.

> *Mir as infrastructure is also in a state of revolution, albeit of a different character.*

The space station rushes around Earth in a relentless cycle, passing Baikonur every 92 minutes. The viewer is able to sense this time span, as the film's length matches the duration of one complete orbit. Repetition based on physical laws creates its own temporal regime, utterly at odds with the biological rhythm of humans. Life on Mir thus follows the Earth clock. More precisely, it follows Moscow's clock – the Soviet empire of time expands into space. Through images of landscapes, *Out of the Present* narrates the change of the seasons on Earth in stark contrast to the absence of any seasonality on Mir itself. These superimposed temporalities subvert orientation in space and time on Mir by suspending earthly frames of reference. Fixes for this blankness include not only the retention of a strict 24-hour schedule, but also the creation of accustomed points of orientation through light and color to simulate floor and ceiling (Ujică and Krikalev 2003: 48).

Thereby, the alienation of cosmonauts from their accustomed diurnal and seasonal round is contained within the walls of Mir, provided that they resist the temptation of looking out of the porthole.

The microgravity environment of Mir creates the experience of weightlessness. *Out of the Present* embodies this experience: images of weightless cosmonauts taken by a weightless camera. The cosmonauts' movements in microgravity lose their habitual angularity, becoming smooth and continuous. Their floating bodies appear abstract and insubstantial, contained only by Mir's metallic hull. Yet when Krikalev is shown working out strapped to a treadmill, his body becomes familiar again. The movements of running, the play of his muscles and the sweating render it earthly in an erotic way.

> *Actual Earthfall is harsh though. As viewers, we brace ourselves for impact when the charred capsule hanging from a parachute falls out of the sky.*

It hits Earth's surface like a meteorite, leaving a small crater on the arid Kazakh steppe. The helpless cosmonauts have to be lifted out of the capsule, weak, dizzy from descent and struggling to cope with Earth's gravity. Becoming Earthbound again is a punishing experience.

The Russian word *mir* is polysemous, translating as '"world," "Earth" and "peace." In *Out of the Present*, space station Mir becomes the world – a crowded and cluttered space enfolded by the vast reaches of the Universe, to which newcomers are greeted ritually with bread and salt in the Russian tradition. Yet Mir is also Earth's companion: it is subject to the latter's gravitational pull, and its matter is carved out of Earth's body like the moon billions of years ago. By orbiting, Mir exerts the tiniest bit of gravity of its own on the home planet, yet both infrastructure and cosmonauts age marginally slower than they would on

Earth. While all directions are experienced as equal in space, the direction towards Earth represents the emotional and epistemic axis for cosmonauts on Mir. In the absence of terrestrial places of history and attachment, Earth as a whole becomes the frame of reference and embodiment of “our home” (Ujică and Krikalev 2003: 49).

Ujică’s work presents an apparent contradiction: *Out of the Present* is a documentary science-fiction film, with a riff on conventional understandings of the genre through repeated docking scenes. Ujică narrates Mir in powerful analogy to Tarkovsky’s space station hovering above Solaris’s planetary sea, of which the many cinematic allusions to *Solaris* are suggestive. The unfathomable Earth sends traumatic memories to Mir, and its inhabitants struggle to make sense of and reconcile these memories with their current condition of existence. At times, they withdraw in joyful regression to childlike play in weightlessness, or stare at Earth through the porthole, transfixed and mesmerized. Yet they also emit cinematographic memories of their struggle back to Earth. By virtue of these memories from the past, the Mir of *Out of the Present* is an impossible (and yet very real) present. Because of this paradoxical condition, Mir becomes an object of representation that is nonimaginary and yet cognitively estranging (Chu 2010). As cinematographic infrastructure, Mir creates estrangement by subverting our habitual attempts to fix objects in space-time – a taken-for-granted earthly practice that tries to make sense of the world.

“Is the camera still rolling?”

“Yes.”

“All right, let it roll.”

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The return of the plague-spreader

Mateusz Laszczkowski
March, 2020

Written in lockdown amid the pandemic, this post speculates about the political and epistemological implications of 'middle-class' reactions to the present crisis. It is also a cry of ethical and political protest—a refusal to see my neighbour as plague-spreader.

(This post is part of Allegra Lab's ongoing #corona thread)

Coronavirus COVID-19 has gone viral and already changed the world, though it remains to be seen exactly how and for whom. Governments around the globe are introducing draconian measures, supposedly to curb the spread of the pandemic, including border closures, curfews, lockdowns, mass quarantine, restrictions on international and domestic travel, bans of public assembly, and geo-tracking of suspected carriers. Amid pervasive fear, which they stoke, these measures receive popular support. Medical research into the virus is still only budding, but

disease presentation and speed of transmission appear comparable to those of familiar flu strains, and, according to WHO, '80% of infections are mild or asymptomatic.' On the other hand, these same sources attest that the mortality rate is high—about 3-4%, though that greatly depends on the availability of adequate treatment. Arguably, it is not the biology of the virus itself that is creating the crisis, but rather the inefficiency and unpreparedness of healthcare systems desolated by decades of systemic neglect in the name of neoliberal austerity. Be that as it may, media reports of rising death tolls have effectively helped induce panic and legitimize constraints on basic freedoms.

Many commentators have noted that the political response to the pandemic appears disproportionate. Other, arguably more dramatic emergencies do not trigger anything near such a massive reaction—like the ongoing cataclysm in Syria or the fate of tens of thousands of refugees trapped in these very weeks between Turkey and Greece, let alone the estimated nine million annual hunger deaths worldwide. For Giorgio Agamben, the present situation is another proof of the 'increasing tendency to use the state of exception as the normal paradigm of government' (also Agamben 2005). Some find ways to be optimistic, like Slavoj Žižek, who believes the virus is a 'Kill Bill-esque' mortal blow to capitalism. Naomi Klein warns that disasters create the conditions for politically repressive and socially regressive policies. In this context, it comes to mind that the ruling elites, especially in Europe and North America, are using the pandemic as an opportunity to push the boundaries of the normal and, possibly, test scenarios for the future—for instance, for when the climate catastrophe leads (as it undoubtedly will) to economic breakdown, anomie, and insurrection.

Here, however, I wish to consider a neglected aspect of the present conjuncture: the responses by the kind of people I can broadly consider my peers—members of the Euro-American urban 'middle class' (however imprecise these terms are).

> *Universities, businesses, and private individuals self-impose restrictions that go beyond those imposed by the governments, creating paranoid cycles of self-reproducing fear.*

While of course measures to protect those most at risk of acute illness and death—primarily seniors and patients with underlying conditions—are necessary, excesses in 'doing what's right' might do more harm than good.

Among the recent flood of images, one juxtaposition captured my attention. On the left, there was a line of people queuing to a store, maintaining some two meters' distance between one person and the next. They looked a bit like commuters at a Finnish bus stop. The image on the right, in contrast, showed a crowd storming a supermarket. 'Contrasting approaches to social distancing among Polish shoppers,' the caption said. This was supposed to be ironic, but at the same time pedagogical, commentary on social behaviour in the days of coronavirus. The 'Finnish bus stop' style was 'right', people elbowing their way into a shop was 'wrong.' I grasped that instantly, without even thinking about it. But wait: 'social distancing'? Isn't that an oxymoron? 'Social,' for all I know, comes from the Latin root for binding, relating, coming closer. 'Social distancing' was naturalized as soon as it appeared —both term and practice— and few noted its oxymoronic nature or pernicious implications. So what happens to what Durkheim would call *la conscience collective* when the scare takes hold? How to think in times of fear and paranoia? How to maintain the capacity of critique when every nonconformist thought is haunted by its own darkest implications?

We can take some cues from Agamben and other contemporary Italian philosophers who have commented on coronavirus. In a recent post, Agamben offers a useful figure for thinking about the present: the *untore*, plague-spreader. During the sixteenth century, when Italian cities were terrorized by the plague, authorities encouraged citizens to report on individuals suspected of smearing the gates, doors, and corner-stones across the city with contagious ointments. The odious figure of the plague-spreader, Agamben suggests, is resurrected today to haunt our cities. It is also transmogrified to assume an even more dreadful, more elusive shape.

> *The plague-spreader is replaced today by the anonymous virus-carrier who shows no outward symptoms of disease yet is able to infect, unaware, anyone*

> *who happens to come near.*

The plague-spreader, for all his spectral nature, was possessed of individuality. They could be identified and neutralized. In contrast, today's carrier has no face. Thus, the philosopher points out, much as the terrorist laws across 'the West' earlier in this century considered every individual a potential terrorist, so today each of us—me, you, every stranger we meet, and everyone we love—becomes a suspected plague-spreader.

That power feeds on paranoia is not new, of course. Suffice it to think of the historic experience of terror in Stalin's USSR and other regimes—past and present—based on the spectre of ubiquitous informants (e.g., Bozzini 2015). But this time, it's the 'Western' liberal subject—for decades fed with feel-good fantasies of consumer capitalism and therefore unaccustomed to any of this—that is affected. At the heart of the paranoia lies the fear not only of the other but also the anxiety that the symptomless plague-spreader might be 'me.' In effect, we are witnessing the rise of a form of user-generated panopticism.

The hashtag #stayhome is one emblem of this. People post photos of themselves, smiling, under self-imposed lockdown and call upon others to follow suit. As Foucault repeatedly noted, there is a pleasure in performing whatever is considered, at a given historical juncture, the 'good' subject position. Hence, the fear of contagion blends with the self-congratulatory affect of 'acting responsibly' and 'protecting us all' by staying home. The hashtagging subject not only acts as his or her own guardian, as did the prisoners in Bentham's Panopticon (Foucault 1995), but does so with enthusiasm, expecting 'likes.'

> *Internalized fear is the new cool. This middle-class panic produces an auto-immunological reaction on bourgeois lifestyles.*

Anxious to preserve 'life as we know it,' citizens lock themselves down. Panicked hoarding puts a strain on capitalist distribution systems and leaves supermarket

shelves desolate. It also leads to skyrocketing prices of food and hygiene products.

A very real danger is that the public orgy of 'responsibility' laced with paranoia sooner or later produces real victims. In many cities, the homeless are left without assistance. Pity they can't afford to #stayhome. Anecdotal evidence from conversations with physicians suggest that the concentration of effort on fighting coronavirus puts other patients at risk when they are refused treatment they would otherwise get. I know painfully well how the lockdowns also disrupt animal welfare and veterinary medicine.

Other consequences are more diffuse but no less significant—ethically, epistemologically, and politically. As Agamben remarks, the resurrection of the plague-spreader entails a degeneration of relations between people. 'Our neighbour is abolished,' he notes. We must not meet, we must not touch, we must maintain 'safe distance.' Even if the enthusiasm for displays of eager self-isolation passes in a week, as such social-media fads usually do, the habits of suspicion and separation for fear of contagion are likely to leave a durable mark on subjectivities. Agamben suggests this is what 'those who govern us' always wanted, but were unable fully to achieve. Panopticism 2.0 does not mean a realization of Orwellian dystopia, but it may mean coming one notch nearer to it. Protest becomes, if not entirely impossible, far less feasible (see, though, a hopeful counterexample from Hong Kong). Scared and separated, we follow the rules and do not question what we're told. We do not congregate to engage in critical reflection. Haunted by mutual suspicion, we are told to stay apart and we choose to stay apart. When universities shut down and social gatherings move online, human contact and exchange of ideas are immensely impoverished (*pace* Sergio Benvenuto). Communication is reduced to technical functions.

> *At the time of paranoia, self-imposed lockdown is therefore the greatest threat to critique.*

Agamben's intuition here is broadly resonant with the thought of another political

philosopher whose work is often juxtaposed to his: Roberto Esposito (even though, with regard specifically to the current 'war' on coronavirus, Esposito believes contra Agamben that it does *not* pose a threat to democracy). Esposito (2008) diagnoses what he calls the 'paradigm of immunization' in modern social and political life. For him, the liberal subject (the possessive individual) is 'an attempt to attain immunity from the contagion of the possibility of community' (Campbell 2006: 4-5). 'Community', according to Esposito, is premised on a partial renunciation of self. The term derives from *munus*, the gift one cannot keep but must pass on, give away. 'Immunity', then, is the individual's exemption from the obligation of reciprocity—the right, granted or usurped, to keep property to oneself. Immunopolitics—a form of power producing subjects whose primary disposition is self-protection from contagion—means nearing the dystopian (neo)liberal ideal of a world of atomized individuals, self-reliant and freed from mutual obligations, performing their functions of production and consumption.

As Olga Tokarczuk put it in her Nobel Prize lecture, faced with the multiple interlocking crises of the present—ecological, political, and economic—we need 'tenderness.' Tenderness, in her sense, is far more than a vague sentimental feeling toward another. Rather, it is an ethical and epistemological practice that entails 'a way of looking that shows the world as being alive, living, interconnected, cooperating with, and codependent on itself.' But tenderness is extinguished in anaesthetic capsules. It is made unthinkable when the auto-immunological instinct to self-isolate takes over.

> *Cultivating tenderness becomes the essential political act in the age of fear.*

Amid paranoia, critique may appear, as Benvenuto puts it, 'civically reprehensible.' Yet, as any crisis, the pandemic confronts us with ethical choices. I can choose to indulge in the paranoid pleasures of hashtaggable 'responsibility.' Or, I may refuse to see my neighbour as the plague-spreader, and struggle instead to preserve a non-immunitary space for the spread of contagious ideas.

(This post is part of our ongoing #corona thread)

Acknowledgments

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When the Silk Road Vanished

Hasan H. Karrar
March, 2020

“I still need to cross Attabad before I reach home” – so our Shimshali travel companion commented matter-of-factly. We had just spent ten days walking along the Pakistan–Afghanistan border, and the best part of the last two days being jostled around in jeeps. Now we were in Karimabad, the tourist hub in central Hunza, and it was time for goodbyes. Yet the ninety-minute boat journey between Attabad and Gulmit that lay ahead for our companion before he reached his village was something no local looked forward to. Maybe I was imagining it, but it appeared that the thought of the crossing compounded his exhaustion.

“Attabad Lake” was formed following a massive landslide in upper Hunza on 4 January 2010 which swept away the village of Attabad and severed the region’s main transport artery, the Karakoram Highway (KKH); the highway is popularly considered a present-day variant on a historic Silk Road (Urdu: *Shahra-e-*

Resham). The aftershocks of the Attabad disaster affected all of upper Hunza's twenty thousand residents. Not only had debris from the landslide buried the KKH, it also dammed the flow of the Hunza river. By the start of summer, the water had extended twenty kilometers (and become up to a hundred meters deep in places); upriver agricultural land and villages were flooded.

> *The Attabad disaster manifested as a new violent reality for locals: there was destruction of habitat and community, loss of land and erosion of livelihoods, and erasure of vital infrastructure, such as the arterial road and the essential mobilities it had previously sustained.*

The Karakoram mountain range in northern Pakistan is the most heavily glaciated region of the world outside of extreme latitudes (Hewitt 2006). The Karakoram – and the western terminus of the Himalaya – make up Gilgit-Baltistan, an administrative unit home to about two million people. While mobility across the region is facilitated by roads, access depends on *the* road – usually there is only one – being passable; hazards such as landslides and flooding can sever vehicular access to and within Gilgit-Baltistan. Today, nearly all the towns and villages in Gilgit-Baltistan can be reached by vehicular transport.

Connecting the Karakoram

One all-weather road, the KKH, connects Gilgit-Baltistan to down-country Pakistan. The lower stretches of the highway follow the Indus, before the road branches towards Gilgit Town (pop. 200,000). North of this administrative capital, the road makes its way, via Hunza and upper Hunza – following the eponymous Hunza river – to Khunjerab (4696m) on the Pakistan–China border, where the KKH connects to the Chinese road network. Similar to other states that border China, road connectivity to the Middle Kingdom is seen as engendering economic prosperity.

Two facts about the Attabad disaster must be foregrounded: First, the Attabad

landslide had been predicted by geological surveys (Khan 2009; Kreutzmann 2010; Cook & Butz 2013: 372) as so-called natural disasters frequently are. Second, the cost of the slow state response – in terms of providing acceptable compensation for loss of land and livelihood – was borne primarily by the people of Attabad, foremost of which were the nineteen individuals who lost their lives when their homes were swept off the mountainside. Additionally, for years subsequently, scores of families were forced to seek refuge in temporary shelters; many of those displaced from Attabad complained about the lack of adequate compensation. As late as 2016, I met people displaced by the disaster who were still sheltering in tents, with no end to their precarity in sight.

Silk Road by Boat

The construction of a bypass road with the necessary tunnels and bridges took five years. Aggravating the disaster was the fact that the only way across the new lake was by open boat. About sixty vessels, most run by private operators from outside Gilgit-Baltistan, served as a lifeline connecting upper Hunza to the rest of the country. Although the cost of travel was within reach of most – it remained steady at PKR 100 (approximately US$1) per person – getting across depended on the availability of a private, for-profit service.

> *Thus, a new political economy around essential transport had been imposed on the region.*

A dock was never constructed; boats daisy-chained to other boats served this function. To cross Attabad Lake, as the reservoir came to be known in common parlance, one had to travel until the road disappeared under landslide debris on the south side or vanished into the water on the north side. Reaching the next departing boat required walking across moored boats and clambering among cargo. Upon reaching the other side, this process was repeated.

For residents of north Hunza, boats became the link connecting them to public services and markets in down-country Pakistan. A distance that could previously be covered in an hour by road, could now become a half-day ordeal. Locals faced these obstacles stoically, although more than one person I spoke with mentioned how difficult the journey was for the elderly or the sick. (The journey was particularly perilous in winter, when stretches of the water froze). The roar of the diesel engine ensured no one conversed during the ninety-minute journey – boats crowded with silent people drifted over vanished fields, past waterlogged orchards and sunken villages.

Paradoxically, as early as 2012 Attabad Lake was being promoted as a tourist attraction. Billboards featuring its cobalt blue waters appeared in Karimabad, enticing visitors to the disaster site. We found Attabad haunting and depressing, my spouse and I confessed to local acquaintances after our first crossing of the young water body; our local friends were visibly relieved, grateful for the acknowledgement that Attabad was seen as more than a tourist attraction by outsiders such as ourselves.

Besides people, the boats we traveled on were ferrying medicine, motorbikes, diesel, tires, construction materials, foodstuffs, bottled water, poultry – the unremarkable cargo of everyday life. This engendered a new labor regime, as everything from daily consumables, household supplies, vehicles and fuel, and construction material was laboriously loaded onto and unloaded from boats. No part of this process was mechanized. While hundreds of wage laborers appeared on the scene in response, this was no Eldorado for anyone.

> *Rather, sheer physical toil compensated for the disappearance of vital infrastructure, the rupture effect of the disaster compounded by the incongruity*

of boat travel through the Karakoram, a high-altitude desert.

The China Trade

Besides connecting Gilgit-Baltistan to down-country Pakistan, the Karakoram Highway also served as a conduit for overland China trade. While overland routes only ever constituted a fraction of Pakistan's commerce with China – the majority of which is seaborne – independent traders had benefited from shuttling goods from Xinjiang since the 1980s. For many traders, in particular those who operated with tight margins, the additional cost of boat transport made importing goods from China unviable (Karrar 2013). In the years leading up to the Attabad disaster, I began observing a growing number of Chinese-manufactured goods for immediate consumption in local markets: fruit juice and snacks, soap and detergent. These were high-bulk, low-value items, peddled by locals, their provenance identifiable by Chinese and Uyghur script. After the Attabad landslide, this flow dried up and did not resume. The loss in earnings through cross-border trade was thus another precarity created by the disaster (Sökefeld 2012). Traders importing goods in larger quantities continued to do so, although they were usually not from Hunza or neighboring locales. These goods were also destined for wholesale markets, and comprised manufactured items such as shoes or clothing.

Postscript: Dystopia?

In September 2015, the Attabad bypass was inaugurated; the informal labor that had coalesced at the site of the disaster vanished as quickly as it had appeared. In the years that followed, Pakistan's dependency on China increased, and Gilgit-Baltistan was now projected as a gateway on the road to bilateral prosperity. Simultaneously, Pakistan saw soaring domestic tourism, concomitant with an emerging middle class and a nationalistic mediascape that celebrates the northern regions, once considered distant and inaccessible.

> *With memories of the disaster and the resultant toil fading, Attabad acquired new meaning: it now featured in television commercials, music videos and cooking shows with chefs preparing local delicacies aboard boats as they gently bob on the water.*

Cyberspace has also played a leading role in the remaking of Attabad (Farrukh 2019). At the place itself, on any given day, visitors can be seen lounging at the many lakeside restaurants, riding pleasure boats and jet skiing while container trucks from China rumble behind.

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Feature image by Hassan H. Karrar.

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On being voices of prudence in

times of a pandemic

Judith Beyer
March, 2020

Many academic disciplines have a lot to say these days about COVID-19. There are the medical experts, of course, epidemiologists, virologists, microbiologists, weighing in on the validity of “the test”, the best way to “flatten the curve”, the fallacies of statistical information, the chains of transmission and the quickest way to find a vaccine. Then there are the legal experts, scholars of constitutional law, of human rights and legal philosophers, weighing in on the dangers of having our rights taken away by our governments, whose reactions have ranged from complete denial to complete shutdown. In between these two extremes, citizens across the world are getting bombarded with governmental “suggestions”,

“appeals”, “recommendations”, “directions”, “and – finally and increasingly – “sanctions” on public behaviour, often without being informed on what basis these specific shifts have been made.

While medical scholars are warning us – rightly so – about the manifold dangers of this virus, legal scholars are warning us – equally justified – about the dangers of surrendering our individual rights. These two points of view are unfortunately not easily reconciled: much rather, their representatives still tend to talk past one another. The discussion we should be having is where to draw the boundary between retaining our rights and having to sanction those who enjoy them at the expense of others.

This situation explains the unending flurry of statements, opinion-pieces and authoritative judgments of (self-proclaimed) experts we are currently witnessing across the world. People like to think they know for sure, and if they themselves do not, they at least like to think somebody else does.

> *This is a time in which we all are much more impressionable through the words of those who might help us regain a sense of security. It is therefore of utmost importance that there are also those who use their voice to say: we simply do not know at this point.*

We need to come to terms with the fact that much of what is presented as factual these days are estimates, probabilities and interpretations. This is not at all to deny the human suffering we are currently witnessing – as we have come to do when it concerns the climate crisis, the plight of refugees, world-wide poverty, hunger, wars, and many other things that we have normalized although they would require equal outrage and immediate action. It is also not to deny that we need to take precautions such as physical distancing, and set up social safety nets for the most vulnerable.

The role of anthropologists in times such as these is to observe diligently. This is not so different from what we are used to do when we are “in the field”. But now

we have to practice from inside our homes. Our job is to read across disciplines, to monitor the media, government briefs and the reports of medical institutions and to allow ourselves to feel overwhelmed while doing all that. We might feel as conflicted as everyone else is, even the "experts" who have styled themselves in such a manner that they now face problems of adapting their narrative to the dynamically evolving situation of both the virus and our governments' reactions. We need to address our growing eerie feelings of insecurity and confusion head-on: There is no single narrative (let alone truth) that is Corona. In a situation that powerful institutions have agreed upon to label as a "pandemic", there is, in fact, no fact out there at this point that is not at the same time political.

> *But what can we do from home, being so overwhelmed, seeing the problematic and political nature of all these facts and narratives?*

First, we can join public debates and be a voice of prudence. This is to help de-escalate discussions where people – sometimes out of sensationalism, sometimes out of hurried obedience and often out of fear – demand that their states take extreme measures of surveillance, deprivation of liberty and sanction. The term "state of exception" has been used to such an extent that we have gotten used to it already – exactly what Giorgio Agamben warned us about.

Second, we can engage with our students and address their sense of insecurity by adapting our upcoming or ongoing courses, seminars and lectures in a way that allows the topic to influence whatever subject we had intended to work on. Since few things are as pervasive as a global pandemic, there is hardly any subject (in anthropology and beyond) which we could not reconceptualize by taking account of COVID-19. As we will have to teach digitally, it is also important to discuss the pitfalls that come with online learning, while making use of newly available resources.

Third, we can practice writing our fieldwork diaries in our homes: Note down how the virus has already impacted our own personal everyday lives, how it has led to a restructuring of our daily schedules, how it has decreased and altered the

amount of time we spend with colleagues and friends and how it might have increased the number of hours we spend with members of our household. For those of us who have children, we can observe how they, too, struggle to adapt to a physical world that has suddenly shrunk and to a digital world that has suddenly expanded. We can look outside our windows and correlate how changes in governmental policies become observable in the very way people physically move in the streets. And we can honestly record our own feelings from day to day. We can then come back to these notes at a later stage – just as we do when we come home from the field.

Anthropologists are never the ones to speak up first and loudest in times of crises. This has been criticized from within the discipline and recently we have seen a resurgence in efforts to resuscitate a "public anthropology". I am very much in favour of doing so: see Somatosphere's COVID-19 Forum or the recent public appearances of Hansjörg Dilger, J. P. Linstroth, or Adia Benton, for example. Our task in the case of COVID-19 is to be voices of prudence, questioning the TINA principle, casting doubts at hasty consensus, and demanding specific reasons for specific measures that impact us all.

> *It might be that not many want to hear us out. We tend to make things more complicated. But we should keep trying because this is exactly what they are.*

Welcome to Roadsides

Roadsides
March, 2020

The side of a road is a good place for ethnography, we think. One of us owns a field next to a country road. It is a twenty-minute drive from the nearest McDonald's restaurant. Judging from the rubbish Matthäus finds in the pasture, that is the time it takes to finish a Big Mac and a soda. Even more than a railroad (Latour 1993: 117), a roadside is neither local nor global. Waiting at the side of the road, at any moment, a window can open for a soda can to be discarded, or a vehicle can stop and maybe you can hitch a ride. But more often than not, the

cars and trucks swoosh by and leave you covered in their dust, speeding off to that global elsewhere.

> *Roads connect and separate, they facilitate flow and scatter way points, they serve as vital infrastructures of contemporary life.*

By the roadside, we can appreciate how infrastructures come to matter.

Roadsides is a collectively managed Open Access e-journal designed to be a forum devoted to exploring the social, cultural and political life of infrastructure. The aim of *Roadsides* is to consider the work that infrastructure does culturally, politically, and socially, as well as the labour that goes into the making of infrastructure itself. We are also interested in the social biographies of materials, discourses, technologies, and knowledges out of which infrastructure is fashioned. A further aim of this journal is to understand how social relations are articulated through infrastructure, become layered into it, and produce new publics and subjectivities.

> *The ways in which humans engage and disengage infrastructure, as well as how infrastructure (dis)engages humans is at the core of the debate.*

At the same time, we want explicitly to embed infrastructure in topography and climate, and trace its trajectories through other-than-human temporalities. Yet another goal of the journal is to devote space to discussing and further developing an ethnographic methodology of infrastructure research.

We understand the title *Roadsides* as a metaphorical proxy for all sorts of engagements arising alongside roads, rail tracks, pipelines, border fences, airports, houses, dams, and other kinds of infrastructure as they are imagined,

contested, constructed, and maintained, and as they fall into disrepair.

> *The journal offers space for reflection, for engaging in conversation with others, and a place to test new ideas before developing them into full-length articles and books.*

We publish two thematic collections of texts a year, each comprising several individual contributions. The aim of each contribution is to introduce one central argument or a piece of analysis, and develop it with an ethnographic vignette, photographs, drawings, video clips and the like. The texts are short – around 1500 words each. In addition to texts, we welcome multisensory contributions combining word, image, and sound.

Roadsides is a "double-open" peer-reviewed journal. This means, among other things, that the peer review is a transparent process, and is understood as constructive, supportive, creative and ethical. We do our best to make sure that both sides – the reviewers and the authors – feel respected. The journal is co-funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation and the University of Zurich. The intention of *Roadsides* is to create a graphically pleasing and, format-wise, more accessible forum for intellectual exchange than might be the case in a typical academic journal. Each collection on the website represents an addition to a gradually developing debate in both textual and visual forms. Calls for contributions to thematic collections are published on the website twice a year.

We are grateful to Allegra Lab for giving us the chance to present *Roadsides* in this forum. Over the coming week, we will publish a number of essays and interventions to illustrate the scope of this project. We will start with a photo essay by Hasan Karrar on the Attabad landslide in Pakistan and what happened when the Karakorum Highway "became liquid" (Rest and Rippa 2019: 381). After

that, Christine Bichsel will take us to outer space and back to the time when the Soviet MIR space station was still orbiting this planet. Luke Heslop will bring us back to the roadside and the nitty-gritty of building roads on the Maldives, before Matthäus Rest will take us up the Arun River into Nepal's Himalaya, where an Indian developer is building a hydropower dam many people had thought would be delayed forever. Next Monday, Julie Chu, Kenzell Huggins, Harini Kumar, Jack Mullee, and Heangjin Park have prepared a multimedia experience on logistics. "Un/boxing Fulfillment" mobilizes the artifact of The Box along with processes of un/boxing to animate key dimensions of "logistical worlds."

We will round out this collection with two calls for papers for upcoming curated collections of *Roadsides*. In the September 2020 collection "Architecture as/and Infrastructure" Madlen Kolbi and Nadine Plachta will interrogate how architecture and urban design function as and with infrastructure. In February 2021, Alessandro Rippa will be editing a themed collection that will draw our attention to archives as the sites central to the imagining of infrastructure, to its planning, as well to its making.

As you can see, quite a lot happens at the side of a road. We hope you will enjoy this short week with *Roadsides* and that you will consider hitching a ride with us!

The Editorial Collective:

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"Sociology is a combat sport"

Allegra
March, 2020

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b0kEU6XdgZc

On February 20th, Allies Julie Billaud, Alessandro Chidichimo, Miriam Odoni, Marie-Claire Peytrignet, together with other members of the Swiss-based non-profit association Programme Indépendant de Recherche (PIR) which also hosts our beloved website Allegralaboratory.net, organized a "boxed conference" at Fonderie Kugler in Geneva.

Yoann Kongolo, a Swiss kick-boxing champion, and Akim Oualhaci, a French sociologist specializing in combat sports, came together on a ring created by artist Thomas Schunke especially for this occasion, for a performance combining sociology and a boxing lesson. While Oualhaci talked about his research in boxing clubs in the working-class neighborhoods of Paris and New York, Yoann Kongolo introduced the audience to a few kick-boxing moves. A punchy and joyful

experimentation with Pierre Bourdieu’s motto: “Sociology is a combat sport”.

The film-story of the event was produced by the experimental graphic studio leidyi.com