

Borders, Race, Virus, and Radiations

By Eddine Bouyahi

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It was in January 2020, during my doctoral research trip to Pretoria, that the Covid virus then ravaging the city of Wuhan came to my attention for the first time. I had never heard the name of that Chinese megacity and paid no attention to these far-off events. No one was talking about it in the hostel where I had settled while conducting my interviews. The Southern Hemisphere summer left little room for reflecting upon a mortal virus coming from Asia. As everywhere else on the planet, we had not understood that the local now crossed borders.

At the time, South Africa was preoccupied with much more pressing problems. The local population was lamenting daily power outages and the calamitous state of the national electrical company. South Africans were following the legal troubles of former president Jacob Zuma, and watching attentively government plans to expropriate without compensation the white farmers, that small minority of South Africans who still own the majority of the country's arable lands. Racism and colonialism are never far in the former settler colonies at the southern tip of the continent. I chatted with the hostel's Afrikaner owner next to a park, who told me "Look, nothing is up to standards, maintenance is shoddy, they don't even cut the grass properly."

Some time later, I arrived in Namibia to continue my research work. I found a room through a friend's contact in Windhoek's wealthiest neighborhood. All the locals including the owners of the house where I am staying were white. They were former Rhodesians who left Zimbabwe shortly after independence and came to Namibia where Apartheid still held. It is there, at the very beginning of March, that the pandemic caught up with me. Borders were shut one after the other and Europe became the epicenter of the epidemic. In Windhoek, people were a little worried but unsure. Masks appeared on the faces of taxi drivers and my interviews were cancelled. For those who remained, when I left, people greeted me from a distance. The virus comes from the outside and so do I. Two positive cases in tourists were detected and the Namibian government quickly announced it was shutting down flight connections outside Africa. The authorities took drastic measures by cancelling the national holidays and independence celebrations. At the same time, my American university asked all its foreign students to either return or sign a waiver. I explained to myself that the threat of a lawsuit is sometimes an expression of concern for others.

The main concern for a lot of people at that time was that the epidemic would reach the African continent and developing countries, and that the victims would be numerous. Westerners on the ground, like myself, feared living through the epidemic in countries with fragile health systems. Conversations with my family and thesis advisors finally convinced me to book a return flight. A layover in Angola and a flight to Paris. I felt like I was leaving a boat destined to shipwreck. I made it to France: a crowded airport and no health screenings as in Windhoek and Luanda. No hand sanitizer, no temperature checks, and a government that was denying the utility of face masks. The name of General de Gaulle, savior of the nation and Resistance hero, was inscribed in large letters. President Macron had just proclaimed war and the irony of the situation crossed my mind. I thought we might very well need a hero, this time too, without knowing who it might be. Quickly, I realized that the heroes are anonymous, ordinary, and often precarious. "Essential workers," they were called, in

this France under confinement. They could be found all over the country. No start-uppers or billionaires among them. I left the airport and found myself in my place of confinement, alone at home in my hometown just north of Paris. “Essential workers” were found there in untold numbers and their skin showed a concentration of melanin higher than the national average. Why did they all live in the same place? Good question....

On TV, one could hear Éric Zemmour and his associates work themselves up yet again against the ballyards, the Muslims, the Blacks and the Arabs. Bad citizens, according to them, they do not respect the rules of confinement. Upon closer look, the light-skinned Parisian bourgeois did not respect them any better despite their higher salaries and more spacious apartments. Nothing terribly new here; racists like to invent the object of their hatred. Figures began to come out. Seine-Saint-Denis was experiencing oversized mortality rates compared to the rest of the country. The department’s hospital services are under-funded and its “essential workers,” extremely numerous, were logically the most exposed. Meanwhile, on social media, we saw a young inhabitant of the poor suburbs lose his leg after an altercation with the police. Videos of racist statements and violent police interventions circulated. In the United States, George Floyd died under the knee of a police officer and the country burst into flames. In France, the journalists on Zemmour’s channel lamented the racism of the American police and society.

During confinement, newspaper articles on the responsibility of China for its management of the epidemic began to multiply. Some compared it to Chernobyl and the tragic attempts by the Soviet dictatorship to cover it up. The comparison is pertinent in more ways than many realized. In France, at the time, the state told the French people that national borders possessed the uncanny ability to block radioactive clouds. According to the authorities, the Gauls not only stopped the Romans but also radiation. When all is said and done, we told ourselves, “impossible” is really not French. Today, the state and a majority of the French people say that national borders stop racial categorizations. That in France, race

does not exist, even as a socially constructed category. Race is America, is South Africa, is other people Clearly, borders don't stop much of anything. Not viruses, not radiation, not the poison of racist discourse.