

## Writing in the time of COVID-19: The threads that bind and tear asunder

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### Abstract

Located against my positionality as a woman of colour from the global south, I deal with the micro and macro dynamics — particularly the intersections of these — of COVID-19. My grounded-ness on account of an invisible virus, spreading like wildfire within and across nation-states, wreaking havoc, destruction and death, is used to illuminate the ramifications of lockdowns and physical distancing. Governments are placed in invidious positions as they try to balance the scales between keeping the economy going, sustaining livelihoods and preserving life. While global and community solidarity are threads that bind in dealing with the extremely pernicious consequences of COVID-19, national self-sufficiencies, resources, capacities, and ethical leadership are essential in determining how countries handle and respond to the virus. Given its impact on all countries, some believed COVID-19 to be an equaliser. However, patterns that emerged reflect that COVID-19 has exacerbated inequalities based on social criteria like race, gender, class and nationality. COVID-19 might alter our futures in ways that are currently inconceivable, and it is invading the spaces within which people breathe, live, learn, love, marry, work, play, and die. But these personal spaces exist within the spaces of the infra-politics of power that I deal with in this article.\*

**Keywords:** COVID-19; Power; Inequality; Race; Class; Gender

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## Introduction

It all had a beginning. The most legitimate narrative to date is that COVID-19 began in the wet markets of Wuhan in China. I was in Lisbon, Portugal, in January 2020 when I first noted the news break about a novel virus affecting people in Wuhan. While there were initial warning bells, with China having alerted the World Health Organisation (WHO) on 31 December 2019 of an unknown virus that had infected about 40 people, which by 11 January 2020 claimed its first death, like many people across the world I did not see it as an imminent threat. While Wuhan did not exist in the minds of most people prior to January 2020, the virus brought the city into the living rooms and language of ordinary people. COVID-19 is a stark reminder of the interconnectedness of the world we live in, as what happens in one country has reverberating impacts on the rest of the world. We are all living the reality of COVID-19. As I wrote in my memoir, “I feel like I am treading a tightrope through science fiction. Coronavirus is the thread that traverses the universe now, threadbare in some and stronger in other parts, both in magnitude and response. Like billions of people across the world, a short while ago I would never have thought that a virus would render life so very different from how we know and experience it, and one that might render a future in ways currently inconceivable” (Sewpaul, 2020, p. 20). In this article, I deal with our need to make meaning of COVID-19; challenges to the neoliberal world order; the infrapolitics of power, with a focus on the USA and South Africa; the predatory role of big-tech companies; and alternatives based on threads that strengthen and bind humanity’s efforts to respond to the brutalising and destructive effects of the virus.

## COVID-19 and meaning-making

Given the magnitude and far-ranging impacts of COVID-19, which have challenged even advanced economies, people have questioned the meaning of COVID-19, and its possible long-term consequences. Capturing the world’s

imagination in the early days of COVID-19, I formulated the following questions: would COVID-19 be the great equaliser that the world is so much in need of? Would it further exacerbate existing inequalities and power imbalances? Is COVID-19 going to be the great liberator that frees humankind from the chains of its own greed? Would it induce a fundamental re-ordering of human values and help heal the world? Might it force us to acknowledge what we have always known but choose to ignore – the profound and inextricable interconnectedness between the self and the universe? Is this the harbinger of a global collective awakening of consciousness? A warning that if we, as human beings, refuse to take care of the whole of nature, nature will find ways of taking care of itself? (Sewpaul, 2020, p. 20-21). I was grappling with the meaning-making of events in my life and COVID-19 in the writing of my memoir.

The lockdowns, which asked people to work from home, saw a cleaner, greener and less polluted world. In a Facebook posting of 17 March 2020, one person wrote about the lockdown effects —the clarity of Venice’s canals, dolphins re-claiming the coasts of Italy, deer the streets of Japan, and monkeys Thailand, concluding with “What we are seeing in the span of a couple of days is amazing” (cited in Sewpaul, 2020, p. 21). Some saw it as nothing short of miraculous. In response to this, I asked: “So why then is the world not screaming: ‘Hurrah thank you, Coronavirus, great job, you’re here to stay!’” and I went on to say, “It is uncanny how in the face this global, and for many of us, inexplicable crisis, we attribute to a virus animate property and personify it as ‘liberator’ or as ‘oppressor’. Clearly, it is the nature of the virus to create death and destruction, but its liberating and/or oppressive potential rests on how we, as humankind, choose to respond to it. It is human beings who have the power to liberate or to enslave, not the virus” (Sewpaul, 2020, p. 21).

People assert their truths from multiple sources as they try to make sense of the seemingly

inexplicable. While some rely on science and empirical evidence, others make meaning by relying on superstition, myths, blind faith and common sense taken-for-granted assumptions. Among one of several messages (the genesis of which is unknown) that have been going around on Whatsapp about the Coronavirus in South Africa is the following:

Everyone is talking about Isaiah 26 verse 20 (referring to the 26<sup>th</sup> of March 2020 when South Africa went on lockdown). It (the lockdown) lasts until 16<sup>th</sup> April (16/04). Did you see what Isaiah 16 verse 4 says: 'The oppressor will come to an end; the destruction will cease and the aggressor will vanish from the land.' The virus is the oppressor/destruction and aggressor" (cited in Sewpaul, 2020, p. 21).

Well, nothing of the Isaiah prediction has come true; the destruction has not ceased, and the lockdown, with its myriad of changing regulations, continued for a long time.

I acknowledge, in my memoir, that some degree of superstition runs in the veins of almost all human beings, even those of us who would like to assert our eminent rationality. It might be innocuous when ordinary people believe that an amulet might protect them against COVID-19. But such a belief can be lethal when held by the Head of State of about 129 million people in the face of a life and livelihood-destroying virus. Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador claimed he had protective religious amulets against COVID-19. He resisted the distancing advised by the WHO and continued with mass rallies and hand-shaking, even as the rate of infections rose in the country (Orsi, 2020). The Tanzanian President, John Magufuli, in an effort to win votes among the predominantly Christian population, also denied the severity of the virus, claiming, "Coronavirus cannot survive in the body of Christ; it will burn" (OYOGist.com, 2020).

In trying to make sense of the devastation of COVID-19, I asserted that we must approach it with the severity it deserves and take all

precautionary measures to prevent its spread. But, acknowledging and responding to its severity must be balanced with hope and optimism. The world has seen other calamities which people have overcome. We will come through this too. All crises have the potential to bring out the best and worst in humanity (Sewpaul, 2020, p. 22). We hope COVID-19 brings out the best in us where we demonstrate the capacity for care, compassion, understanding, empathy, unity and solidarity.

On a personal level, there are issues of serendipity and synchronicity in my COVID-19 experience. On returning from Lisbon in February 2020, I immediately went on a work-related trip to Seychelles. As the virus began its rapid cross-border transits, I was concerned that I might be stuck on a small island state. Fortunately, international travel bans were not in place in early March 2020, and I was able to return home, albeit with much trepidation and fear of infection on the flights. I would have started preparing for teaching in Norway immediately upon arriving home from the Seychelle, as I was due to teach there in March 2020, but COVID-19 rendered me grounded. I decided to use my grounded-ness to make that delayed appointment, recommended by my cardiologist, for an elective diagnostic angiogram. I had open heart, quadruple bypass surgery in 2010, and I had retained relatively good health and remained asymptomatic. I approached the angiogram, which was scheduled for 18 March 2020, with nonchalance, taking for granted that I would be given a clean bill of health.

To put it mildly, the angiogram results constituted the death of my sense of invincibility. I was told that there was severe narrowing of the blood vessels, that all the grafts that were done during the bypass surgery had collapsed, and that the native coronary vessels were also narrowing. I was told that I could lose my legs if something was not done immediately. I had an emergency procedure done, with two stents put into the right and left common iliac vessels. So fine for now. But the coronary vessels still need to be sorted out and would have to

wait until the Corona-crisis is over, as all hospitals deal with the pandemic. The results of the angiogram indeed constituted a death of my sense of invincibility, but not my sense of hope. I turned the problem into a project. The diagnosis galvanised me into action to write my memoir — a long delayed personal project. I began with the first chapter, titled, *Writing in the time of COVID-19: March 2020* for ease of entry into the next chapter, which is deeply personal, and was an emotionally demanding one to write.

I wrote my memoir under the spectre of COVID-19, bombarded by an incredulous rise in daily numbers of infections and deaths; a rude reminder of the vulnerability of humanity and the mortality of all. Coincidentally, the timing worked for me. Clearly, the whole of the universe did not conspire in my favour to produce a virus at exactly that time to save my life! Cousineaus (undated) defines synchronicity as “an inexplicable and profoundly meaningful coincidence that stirs the soul and offers a glimpse of one’s destiny.” Issues of serendipity and synchronicity bring into focus some of the vexing questions of human existence – what are the ordered, peculiar and complex combinations of the infrapolitics of power, structure, free-will and destiny that shape human lives? Whatever it is, living in the time of COVID-19 and my personal confrontation with my own mortality stirred my soul into questioning the forces of my own destiny and inspired the writing of my memoir.

While unique in some ways, I know that some of my COVID-19 experiences and responses are shared by billions of people across the globe. While on some days I was totally obsessed with COVID-19 news following infection and death rates in every country, and the socio-political and economic dynamics at play, at other times, I felt overwhelmed by all of it and had to go on a news fast. Maintaining the news fast was not easy, as I was assailed with notifications and calls for webinars, zoom meetings and online seminars and conferences, call for papers, and a range of WhatsApp and social media messages, with much conspiracy theories, all related to COVID-19. Over a short period of time, in the quest to make sense of this seemingly

inexplicable phenomenon, COVID-19 seemed to have multiplied a range of experts in diverse academic disciplines and fields of practice who produced innumerable COVID-19 training manuals and guidelines. Many individuals and organisations are eager to claim their credibility and place of eminence in this earth-shattering period of history. And against this need to make meaning of COVID-19, prevent its spread, and mitigate its effects is the infrapolitics of power and challenges to the neoliberal world order.

### **COVID-19: Challenges to the neoliberal world order?**

As reflected below, Arthur Kleinman’s poignant writing on human suffering holds particular salience during COVID-19.

We stand at the thick of human experience, in the space of human problems, in the real-life local places where people live in the face of dangers, grave and minor, real and imagined. Here is where fear and aspiration, desire and obligation, mesh in the close encounters of ordinary men and women with the pain and disaster and with the infrapolitics of power that apportion those threats unequally and distribute responses to them unfairly across social fault lines in actual worlds (Kleinman, 1999, p. 376).

COVID-19 undoubtedly, invaded personal spaces, affecting how people lived, learnt, loved, married, worked, played, and died. But, as I pointed out “these personal spaces exist within the spaces of the *infrapolitics of power* (Sewpaul, 2020, p. 30), and I questioned, “How might this infrapolitics of power play itself out within and across nation-states, and influence the outcomes of the virus? What might the consequences be as the virus fully gains ground in the global south? With the grave destruction that it is wreaking upon the global north – with its superior resource capacities - what might its impacts be for the global south?” (Sewpaul, 2020, p. 30). The cracks in the social fault lines of

race, class, gender and nationality are worse than we could have imagined, with inconceivable human costs.

Stock markets have crashed, there have been rapid rises in death rates, unemployment, hunger and food insecurity, major economies are moving into recession, air traffic has been curtailed, with disruption in global trade and restricted movement of people. In the face of this, I asked, “[w]ould COVID-19 bring into question the workings and the consequences of the free market ideology? Can we go on believing that global economic integration is the panacea for the problems confronting many parts of the world? Might we see less of “made in China” post COVID-19?” (Sewpaul, 2020, p. 23).

I argue that “while global solidarity is critical to deal with the extremely pernicious consequences of COVID-19, what is evident is that national self-sufficiencies, resources, capacities and leadership constitute quintessential criteria that determine how nation states engage in preventing the spread of the virus, and in mitigating its effects” (Sewpaul, 2020, p. 23-24). I call for an approach that supports Keynesian egalitarianism based on state intervention, market regulation, the involvement of organised labour to promote full employment and economic growth, and some state ownership of crucial national enterprises like railroads, public utilities, health services and energy. Keynes (1933) argued that:

Ideas, knowledge, science, hospitality, travel ... should of their nature be international. But let goods be homespun whenever it is reasonably and conveniently possible, and above all, let finance be primarily national ... National self-sufficiency ... though it costs something, may be a luxury, which we can afford, if we happen to want it (unpaged).

Making this a reality will require strong political will as nation-states increasingly adopt neoliberal practices that favour trade liberalisation, privatisation and deregulation.

COVID-19 implodes the belief that capitalism underpins a fair and safe social system. Heywood (2020) points out that the worst-hit countries like Brazil, the USA, UK, Russia, India and South Africa are characterised by neoliberal deregulation and global economic integration. In contrast, European social democratic welfare systems, with strong social security and solidarity, have been more resilient and adopted better COVID-19 defence strategies.

I questioned whether COVID-19 would put capitalism on trial, despite governments and central banks breaking capitalist rules that, in regular times, would be immutable (Sewpaul, 2020, p. 23). Some of us thought that the economic crisis of 2007/2008, held the potential to create cracks in people’s consciousness about the moral and pragmatic limits of a neoliberal system considered inviolate (Sewpaul, 2008). Steger and Roy in 2010 predicted that if the crisis continued to deepen, “both third-wave neoliberalism (of a more moderate kind than its two predecessors) and a global new deal (built on Keynesian principles) are distinct possibilities for the second decade of the twenty-first century” (p. 137), while Dumenil and Levy (2011) were optimistic that the crisis might “favour a transition evocative of the New Deal” (p. 333). Sadly, the 2007/2008 global economic crisis was insufficient to clinch this new deal (Sewpaul, 2015). The opportunities were lost. Given the hegemony of neoliberalism and its entrenched institutions and practices in favour of capitalist elites, who are unwilling to give up their privileged positions, this will require a very strong counterhegemonic discourse to neoliberalism; an envisioning of another and a better world based on egalitarianism and an emancipatory politics, with popular movements continuing the pressure in challenging global capitalism.

### **The infrapolitics of power: The USA and South Africa**

I focus on the USA, the world’s richest country and the embodiment of global capitalism, and South Africa, where I was born and where I reside. Former President Donald Trump was the worst world leader in the handling of the Covid-

19 crisis, holding onto “xenophobic, nationalist, and neoliberal capitalist ideas, and to COVID-19 denialism, re-asserting time and time again that it is a ‘Chinese virus’ that is no problem, and will go away” (Sewpaul, 2020, p. 24). Understandably then, many Americans believed they were immune to infection, as they saw it as an Asian virus, which manifested in exclusions and violence against ethnic minorities. Trump is the epitome of the dynamics of othering. “We the great liberal Americans against ‘them’ who are foreigners, rapists, murderers and terrorists!” (Sewpaul, 2020, p. 24). Given the country and continent that houses me and the colour of my skin, Trump’s construction of the *other* does not remain at an abstract level. The political is indeed personal!

Trump claimed that the Democrats politicised COVID-19 and blew it out of proportion. The NPR/PGB NewsHour/Marist Poll (cited in Allyn and Sprunt, 2020) found that as the virus spread, fewer Americans – mainly Republicans – saw it as a real threat. Despite cautioning by Dr Anthony Fauci about bleak days ahead, 54% of Republicans believed that the responses to COVID-19 were overblown (Allyn and Sprunt, 2020). Trump, as late as 9 March 2020, in a Twitter feed asserted: “[t]he Fake News Media and their partner, the Democrat Party, is doing everything within its semi-considerable power (it used to be greater!) to inflame the Coronavirus (sic) situation, far beyond what the facts would warrant”. On 10 March 2020, Trump claimed, “[i]t will go away. Just stay calm. It will go away” (CNBC, News, 2020), and he unashamedly defied CDC and WHO regulations regarding prevention measures. With Trump’s downplaying of COVID-19, the USA had, as of 4 August 2020, almost five million infections and nearly 159 000 deaths (Worldometers.com, 2020).

Despite calls for strict measures to curb the virus, Trump proffered the American people the opening of religious institutions and the economy. Reflecting his megalomaniac narcissism, on the day that he declared a national emergency, the corporate elites – Target, Walmart and CVS - were present, with

many singing his praises. It came across as an election campaign rather than a press conference declaring a national state of emergency. Trump resisted the recommendations of various state governors to bring the production of essential medical supplies under federal control so that pricing and distribution could be regulated. He dismissed this as a socialist pursuit, citing how nationalisation failed Venezuela, yet the call in the USA was not for the wholesale nationalisation of assets. The call was to save lives, make medical supplies available at affordable rates and regulate profit-making companies that increased the prices of life-saving medical goods during the pandemic (Sewpaul, 2021).

The following is from my memoir, in which I compared the USA and South Africa. In contrast with Trump’s approach, South Africans witnessed the decided and empathetic leadership of President Cyril Ramaphosa, particularly during the first phase of the lockdown. Ramaphosa consistently called for the police and military to approach “our people who are afraid” of the virus; losing their jobs; poverty and starvation; lives being put on hold — with care, compassion and sensitivity, and to see their roles as saving lives. We are living in an unprecedented time when distance means hope and keeping alive. For some, living in overcrowded townships and shacks, physical distancing is a luxury they can barely afford. For others, getting their daily bread takes precedence over the threat of the virus.

Unfortunately, the lockdown did not always pan out as the President repeatedly exhorted. On the very first day of the initial 21-day lockdown, video footage surfaced on social media showing members of the police and the armed forces swearing at, kicking and beating people.

Some justified the actions of law enforcement officers who, they asserted, are “afraid” and “frustrated”. To those who condoned the actions of these officers, my question was: “[w]ould we justify doctors, nurses and social workers, who might also be afraid and frustrated, swearing, kicking and beating up people?” (Sewpaul, 2020,

p. 27). Clearly, such conduct on the part of these professionals would be deemed unacceptable. We know that they are duty-bound to serve, even at personal costs, and they are required to treat all people with respect and dignity. COVID-19 is a public health issue with substantial socio-political, economic and psycho-social ramifications and it is not primarily a law and order issue.

Compared with our views on health and social services professionals, I asked “have we so normalised the archetype of the military and the police as punitive, that we tolerate and even justify violence perpetrated by them?” (Sewpaul, 2020, p. 27), and I point out that the military and the police also have their ethical requisites to uphold the fundamental rights of all persons, and to abide by the rules of international humanitarian law as contained in the Geneva Convention. Abuse of power by the military and police must be taken seriously. Historical and contemporary events inform us of some autocratic regimes instituting sweeping powers during national disasters that violate the constitutional rights of people, whose lifespan may extend beyond the disaster. The Egyptian emergency law that was passed during the Arab-Israeli war in 1967 was only rescinded in 2012 when Mubarak was removed from power (Human Rights Watch, 2012), and the emergency law adopted by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, accorded him the power of surveillance of citizens, and the power to delay his own corruption trial!

Compared with the West, the virus is a latecomer to Africa, and South Africa is currently the epicentre of the virus in Africa. In March 2020, I questioned whether Ramaphosa’s decided leadership might save us from the fate of the US or whether the socioeconomic differences between the USA and South Africa might disadvantage South Africa irrespective of leadership. I also questioned whether the leadership demonstrated by the President in the early days of COVID-19 in South Africa might contribute to some measure of egalitarianism in the country.

Globally, the numbers are astounding, with over 18 million infections and over 700 000 deaths, as of 4 August 2020 (Worldometers.com), and we are nowhere near the peak of the virus. By the end of the month, the cumulative total number of infections rose to 25 million, with over 800 000 deaths (WHO, 2020). South Africa’s immediate response to the COVID-19 crisis was lauded by me and several others, including the WHO, as exemplary. Modelling exercises show that we have, with the timely measures put in place, prevented over 20 000 deaths in the initial phase of the lockdown. The decisive response does seem to have saved us from the fate of our US counterparts. The USA’s poor leadership and Trump’s preoccupation with the economy and stimulation of the stock markets rather than save lives, and the privileged protests for individual liberties above the greater good, have certainly been at the peril of the American people. With Jair Bolsonaro imitating Trump, it was not surprising that Brazil topped Russia with the second-highest number of infections at over 2.7 million and over 94 000 deaths (Worldometer.com, 4 August 2020). It was still too early days in the course of the virus to tell with any degree of certainty what the ultimate outcomes would be. The number of infections in South Africa were growing exponentially, and as of 4 August 2020 there were almost 517 000 infections and over 8 000 deaths (Worldometers.com).

The growing trends in South Africa were not so positive on many fronts, the most prominent of which were the risks associated with the deployment of the army to help the police to enforce lockdown measures. Although Ramaphosa repeatedly called on security personnel to undertake their responsibilities with respect for the dignity and rights of people, this had not panned out as envisaged. Contrary to the President’s views, police minister Bheki Cele had, from the very beginning, supported and reinforced punitive measures, with his key message being to arrest. Ironically, while the government proposed the release of 19 000 prisoners to allow for physical distancing in prisons, as of 2 April 2020, 17 209 people were arrested for violating lockdown regulations for

activities such as jogging, surfing, walking on the streets, being on the beach, and informal trading. Of greater concern was the abuse of power by security personnel with the beating of people, and the deaths of nine people, one of whom, Colin Khosa, from the township of Alexandra, was murdered for drinking beer in his own yard. Police brutality in South Africa is a reminder of the pervasive racial profiling in the USA, with attacks on racial minorities by White police, with the most recent incidents imploding into global protests against racism, particularly with the “Black Lives Matter” movement. While the race demographics and political dynamics across the USA and South Africa differ in marked ways, Black people across both contexts are subject to police brutality, and systemic racism reflects the impacts of racialised capitalism in relation to wealth distribution and other socio-economic indicators.

COVID-19 has warranted some legitimate constraints on the civil liberties of individuals in the interests of the greater good. But there were also concerns about shifting to authoritarian, police states, and the introduction of regulations that are irrational. South Africa had imposed a total ban on the sale of cigarettes and alcohol. While this was considered acceptable under level five of the lockdown, its continuation under levels four and three caused nationwide concern. The bans failed to stop people from smoking or drinking alcohol. The continued bans on these reflected the lack of understanding of addictions. As people went to any lengths to obtain cigarettes and alcohol, the prohibitions witnessed flourishing of existing black markets with exorbitant prices. There were reports of people dying and being hospitalised on account of consuming home-brewed alcohol. There are anecdotal reports of people turning to drugs, which have always been in ample supply, on account of the huge costs of cigarettes. Legitimate cigarette and alcohol outlets were denied livelihoods, with millions of jobs at risk that added to the already very high unemployment rate, which at the end of 2019 stood at an official rate of 29.1%, and an expanded rate of 38.5%. Illicit trade in cigarettes and alcohol costs the national treasury R1,5

billion in taxes, which could be used for the COVID-19 National Solidarity Fund to help the poor and unemployed in the country.

The government argued that the ban on alcohol and cigarettes were to save lives, though there was no scientific evidence to back the claim. The decrease in the levels of crime and trauma-related hospitalisations in the first phase of the lockdown had been attributed to the ban on alcohol, and thus one of the justifications for the continued banning. During the lockdown between 29 March 2020 and 20 April 2020, South Africa saw a decrease in murder rates by 72%, rapes by 87% and assaults by 85% (Mlamla, 2020). However, countries with no such ban saw similar reductions in crime within comparable time periods. El Salvador saw a decrease in murders by 50%, and Argentina a decline in robberies by 90%. Despite the strong drug and gang culture, Colombia saw homicides drop by 55%, assaults by 86%, and robberies by 90% (Renteria, 2020; UNODC, 2020). The reduced crime rates must be viewed in relation to the overall effects of the lockdown, with restricted movements of people, fewer people in public places, and lesser opportunities to engage in criminal behaviour, supported by UNODC’s (2020) finding that “pre-lockdown trends re-emerged once measures were relaxed” (p. 3).

People in South Africa began to question who was benefitting from the draconian measures and the clampdown on the civil liberties of people, and were suspicious of the intentions of the government. Many questioned whether it was really about saving lives or the imposition of state authority and control. Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma, the ex-president’s former wife, strongly advocated for the retention of the ban on cigarettes and alcohol. Whether for want of any better explanation or whether there is truth to it, there were rumours of Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma sharing a corrupt relationship with a cigarette smuggler, Adriano Mazzotti, who has engaged in fraud, money laundering and tax evasions. Edward Zuma, former President Jacob Zuma’s son, was once director of Amalgamated Tobacco and was accused by the South African Revenue Services of smuggling and tax evasions.



Given the track record of the Zuma family in widespread corruption and state capture of the country, public perceptions were understandable. On 24 May 2020, Ramaphosa announced that alcohol sales would be permitted from 1 June 2020, but that the ban on cigarettes would remain, which strengthened the suspicion about who was benefitting from the illegal sales of cigarettes.

While Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma clamoured for cigarette bans to remain in place, and some businesses remain closed, schools began reopening as of June 2020. According to a joint UNESCO/UNICEF/World Bank Report (2021), nationwide school closures disrupted the education of more than 1.6 billion students, that is, 91% worldwide. The interrupted education of children was not only South Africa's disquiet. While the country backed children's need for and right to education, the planned resumption generated much concern. Some township schools have as many as 90 learners per classroom, which would make physical distancing impossible, and almost 4000 schools lack basic resources like water and sanitation. On 20 May 2020, five teacher unions reported on the results of 9 000 schools across South Africa. The survey, conducted between 15 to 18 May 2020, showed that 95% had not received hand sanitisers, 78% did not have soap and water, 99% had not received delivery of sufficient masks for learners, and 92% did not have materials for cleaning and disinfection (Macupe, 2020).

Basic Education Minister, Angie Motshekga, said that while there could be no assurance of no deaths, schools must reopen. Many parents were concerned about the safety of their children and refused to send their children to school, irrespective of government directives. Teachers and school principals also expressed misgivings about the lack of readiness of schools for the planned reopening. South Africa seemed to be taking its cues from other more developed economies, such as South Korea and Denmark, in its reopening. The striving for Western standards has been one of our failures in education, as we are pushed to measure up to standards deemed to be inviolable by the West.

What would be the major loss be if we focussed on the preparation of exit level learners to prepare them for the world of work and relationships, and for entry into post-school education and allow the rest condoned passes? Online schooling and grading will work only for a few minority elites, unless dedicated efforts are made to make education more inclusive and equitable. Our children's lives, and those of their families, are worth some creative thinking beyond school and examinations.

During the first phase of the lockdown, with the empathetic leadership of Cyril Ramaphosa, despite the highly devastating consequences of COVID-19 and the dire straits that we were in, for the first time in a long time, I felt hopeful and proud about my country. I saw a nation coming together with opposition parties, private businesses, civil society, trade unions and many sectors on board in common solidarity to save lives and mitigate the effects of the virus. Unfortunately, such support and solidarity fast weakened. Divisions emerged, suspicions increased, and the government was taken to court on account of unfair lockdown regulations and practices. On the positive side is our vibrant, vigilant and active civil society that is willing to hold the government accountable, and much public pressure has been put on the government to be responsive to the needs of the poor. Unfortunately, policy decisions are being implemented at too slow a pace. A monthly COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress R350.00 (about 23 US\$) grant had been promised to unemployed people. But, out of the 3.5 million applicants, very few received the grant after Cyril Ramaphosa announced the grant on 21 April 2020, on account of the infrastructure and mechanisms not being in place. I have been one of many in South Africa who have been advocating for a basic income grant (BIG) for several years, with letters to the media, petitions and communication with the government. Had the government then responded to the needs of the poor, it would not have scrambled under crisis conditions to provide solutions without systems in place for their implementation. One of the positive outcomes of COVID-19 and public pressure is the Government's announcement

that it was considering the implementation of a BIG.

### **COVID-19: The politics of gender, race, class and nationality**

Governments are placed in invidious positions as they try to balance the scales between keeping the economy going and sustaining people's livelihoods, and preserving life. The world cannot remain in lockdown forever, and as we resume some sense of normalcy and leave our homes to go about our daily living, there is no saying who will and who will not get infected and who will succumb in death to the virus. Medical science speaks to probabilities with higher risks based on age and those with pre-existing medical conditions, especially those with compromised immune systems, but not of certainties. The virus makes no choice of its host, acting upon its natural propensity to settle upon those who happenstance to be available for its survival and spread. But COVID-19 is laying bare the associated pandemics of racism, classism, gender discrimination and violence, child abuse and neglect, and xenophobia, which are no strangers to social work.

There is growing disturbing evidence of the virus, like HIV/AIDS, disproportionately affecting and infecting the poor. COVID-19 is exacerbating the threads of existing inequalities and power imbalances, with the divides based on race, gender, class and nationality running deep tearing asunder even advanced economies of the world. Paxio Ksatryo (2020) asserts:

Indeed, COVID-19 targets all individuals, irrespective of age, race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, and ability. But the truth is, discrimination does come into play. Our ability to defend ourselves from contracting the virus is inextricably linked to our race, class, and gender. COVID-19 puts the lives of those on the fringes of society most at risk. One of the starkest examples of this vulnerability can be found in a minority that lies at the

intersection of these facets: undocumented migrant women working in the care sector (unpaged).

With no state social security or provision of emergency aid, undocumented migrants often work in the most precarious, lowest-paying conditions that render them more vulnerable to infection. In poorer countries, it is not only undocumented migrants but a great majority of nationals who work in the informal sector, particularly in domestic and care work. A large number of these are women, and in South Africa, it is African-Black women who are most at risk. Staying at home for many is a luxury that they cannot afford. The choices are stark: stay at home and they and their children face starvation and death, go out to work and risk death through COVID-19. But they are not islands unto themselves; they live, breathe and work in the world of the rich too, so if not out of care and compassion for the other, out of self-interest there is a need to care for the other and to work towards a more just world.

Disaggregated data on a global level show that the virus disproportionately affects some groups more than others. For example, although African Americans make up only 13% of the population, they had a 30% infection rate of COVID-19. In New York City, Blacks and Latinos were infected and dying twice the rate of their white counterparts (Ramanarayanan, 2020). The social indicators of disease reflect that poor people live in areas where physical distancing, and adopting other basic preventive measures are real challenges. About 40% of the world's population lacks basic hand-washing facilities with soap and water in their homes, and in the least developed countries, this increases to nearly 75% (UNICEF, 2020). As in other parts of the world, in overcrowded, small match-box size houses in South African townships, and shack dwellings, with no sanitation, shared communal toilet facilities and no piped water, physical distancing and the basic requisites to maintain hygiene and hand-washing become impossibilities. In South Africa, 26 years post-democracy, these living patterns still take on racialised lines, with the African-

Black being the most susceptible to infection. COVID-19 is laying bare gross human rights violations in terms of access to basic resources like water, shelter, sanitation and food.

Women who are forced to be prisoners in their homes during lockdowns are subject to domestic violence. According to Eye Witness News (2020), there has been a surge in the number of women who have called the domestic violence helpline since South Africa's lockdown on 27 March 2020; within a three-week period 120 000 calls were made, which was double the usual volume of calls. Femicide in South Africa is five times the global average, with half of them perpetrated by men who the women had been in close relationships with. South Africa is reflecting a worldwide pattern of increased domestic violence on account of lockdowns. Executive Director of UN Women, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, said that COVID-19 brought forward the "shadow pandemic of violence against women" (Lefafa, 2020). People are forced into extended hours of being together under stressful conditions of unemployment, financial constraints and food insecurities. Women remain isolated with abusive partners in their homes without access to support structures and people whom they can turn to, thus creating the perfect conditions for controlling and abusive behaviours.

In South Africa, food hampers intended for distribution to the poor have been appropriated by corrupt officials and used as bargaining chips. We have seen exorbitantly priced e-learning contracts and irregular procurement deals. The scramble for survival at the bottom is heightening xenophobia, and in South Africa, the government is not making things easier. The decision to build a fence along the Beit Bridge border post at the cost of R37 million to prevent Zimbabweans from the chance to purchase life-saving food does not make sense. As Africans, we pride ourselves in our inclusive brotherly/sisterly, communitarian Ubuntu values and ethics. Borders and walls are not part of our utopias. That is supposed to be a Trumpian dream that we so much abhor. We

must aim to build bridges that connect, not walls that divide.

### **COVID-19: The politics of money, power and big tech**

As with any major crisis, COVID-19 has brought out the best and the worst of humanity across the globe. There are heart-warming stories of those who are making enormous sacrifices in the service of others; many front-line workers who risk their lives on a daily basis to save lives; volunteers who are ensuring the food security of people and helping with the provision of personal protective equipment; strangers reaching out to others; social workers who are providing the much needed psychosocial support to individuals, families and communities, ensuring that women and children remain protected, working with refugees, and on the reintegration of deported migrants on account of COVID-19 (Sewpaul, 2020). Yet, on the other hand, there are predatory businesses, politicians, individuals and some corporate elites that have been taking advantage of the crisis for self-enrichment. We have seen sky-rocketing prices of personal protective equipment and hand sanitisers, increased cyber-crimes, and reports of corruption in many parts of the world (Athal, 2022; UNODC, 2022).

In this world of "no human touch" (humans are now "biohazards" according to Anjua Sonalker, CEO of Steer-Tech), and the promises of human-less, contact-less technology-mediated solutions that will see even greater levels of unemployment and poverty, high-tech companies are posing themselves as the saviours, but with profit as the real motive. Naomi Klein has written a scathing attack on this in *The Guardian* of 13 May 2020, focussing on the former CEO of Google, Eric Schmidt's proposals to reimagine New York State's post-COVID reality by integrating technology into every aspect of daily life. While his earlier briefs to government for greater funding for technology development were about the USA losing its competitive edge to China ("the USA is not playing to win" said Schmidt), Schmidt rebranded his calls to be "sold to the public as our only possible hope of protecting ourselves

from a novel virus that will be with us for years to come”, with pressure to decrease regulatory controls (Klein, 2020).

The discursive shifts are earning big tech companies premium spaces in the corridors of politics with political partners in the desperate search for solutions, latching onto the promises of technology-mediated solutions, which are incentive enough to part with huge chunks of state funds. While not eschewing the place of technology, Klein questions the use of public funding for tech funding and asks about public ownership and control rather than the creation of multi-billionaire individuals in our neoliberal world. Unfortunately, rather than promote the wellbeing of all, and strengthen the threads that bind us into common humanity, many corporate individuals and companies are using COVID-19 as get-rich-quick scheme.

In response to these proposed tech solutions, Klein (2020) cited Andy Pallotta, president of the New York State United Teachers Union, “If we want to reimagine education, let’s start with addressing the need for social workers, school nurses, enriching arts courses, advanced courses and smaller class sizes”, and pointed to parents’ complaints of the deficiencies of screen-based education. In conclusion to her treatise, Klein (2020) asserted:

...we face real hard choices between investing in humans and investing in technology. The brutal truth is ... we are very unlikely to do both ... If tech companies win their ferocious lobbying campaign for remote learning, telehealth, 5G and driverless vehicles – their Screen New Deal – there simply won’t be enough money for urgent public priorities, never mind the Green New Deal that our planet urgently needs. On the contrary: the price tag for all the shiny gadgets will be mass teacher layoffs and hospital closures.

Technological advances and responses are double-edged swords. While they provide solutions, they also further the divides between

the haves and the have-nots and hold the potential to exacerbate poverty and inequality.

Technology is not a substitute for authentic human contact, which millions of people are currently deprived of. The innumerable and distressing TV images of illness and death have, for many people, awakened their own primordial fears of illness, aloneness, debilitation and death. Love in the time of COVID-19, for so many, meant not spending time with loved ones when needed most. It also meant dying alone in isolation hospital wards, having no funeral, and families not having the opportunity to say goodbye and reach closure (Sewpaul, 2020). The science fiction spectre was most enlivened in news and scenes of unclaimed dead bodies and mass graves. Like many others, I have said that staying home and saving lives is no sacrifice; it is a responsibility towards self and others. This is true for some of us, but for many people remaining home and maintaining physical distance is a huge sacrifice. But they do it for lack of choice, and they do it in the name of solidarity and for the greater good of humanity. For some, breaking lockdown rules is a matter of survival and for others, a claiming of individual liberties against the common good with privileged protests that violate people’s right to life (Sewpaul, 2020).

#### **Alternatives: Threads that bind**

With the current untenable conditions of millions of people across the globe, it is difficult to imagine the more deepened and brutalising effects of COVID-19. The unpalatable thought of this should be enough to stimulate us, and those with political and economic power, to strengthen humanity’s threads that bind and to use COVID-19 to reimagine our world. In this strengthening and reimagination, we must: challenge and undo neoliberalism, and adopt systems of socio-political and economic governance that promote greater solidarity; work towards achieving equitable, socially inclusive, integrated and environmentally sustainable economic growth and toward people-centred social democracies and social justice; and recognise the indivisibility and interdependence of civil, political, economic, social,

cultural and environmental rights (Sewpaul, 2020). While socio-economic and political reordering are critical, there must be a reimagination of *thought and attitude* to ensure that the dignity and worth of all peoples are respected and responded to, bearing in mind that such dignity is reflective of the divinity that exists in all, irrespective of race, class, gender, religion, nationality (dis)ability, social position and sexual orientation. Furthermore, we need to recognise that we do indeed live in an interdependent world. The wellbeing of one is dependent on the wellbeing of the other. In the face of this destructive pandemic, we need the more pervasive, powerful and permeating cross-border forces of love, care, compassion, empathy and solidarity. These are the threads that bind.

While the battle for the use of clean energy continue, people, particularly environmental activists, have lauded the unintended effects of COVID-19. Cleaner oceans, rivers and canals; fish, birds and animals reclaiming their spaces; cleaner air and less pollution. In making meaning of COVID-19 these are the gains that people are looking at, in addition to strengthened human relationships, with a shift in language from social to physical distancing, and with calls for greater solidarity. In some ways, COVID-19 has helped us to realize our common humanity. The wreaking of havoc in the developed West indicates that it is not only people from the Rest of the world who are vulnerable. In COVID-19 we recognize the vulnerability of all of humanity as we confront and manage our uncertainties, fears and uneasiness.

While money, technology, built infrastructure and access to resources are important, they have not been, in themselves, insufficient to stay the deaths of over 698 000 people on a global level as of 4 August 2020, most of which come from the developed West. Unfortunately, the USA, the wealthiest country in the world, paints the worst picture, with loss through death reaching incalculable proportions. If the USA's resources were coupled with strong and ethical leadership directed at unity, strength and courage rather than populist divisions, I am sure the USA would

not be in this unenviable position where it is eliciting the world's pity, rather than the world's admiration. With the tolls, in so many ways, with the decimation of economies, unprecedented rates of unemployment, food insecurity, poverty and death, being so high in the developed West, what might the full costs be when the virus hits the Global South in full force? (Sewpaul, 2020). While we fear worst-case scenarios, we live in the hope that the spirit of global and community threads that bind prevail as we negotiate the multiples crises and losses associated with COVID-19 and that we maintain some of the gains made during the crises in our post-COVID-19 world.

### Conclusion

COVID-19 is undoubtedly highlighting the gross inequalities that exist and is imploding the myth of the sacrosanct, inviolable nature of neoliberal capitalism. The USA, with its deep capitalist entrenchment, is the most unequal of developed nations. This, combined with exceptionally insensitive and poor populist leadership, has contributed to the unenviable COVID-19 position that the country currently occupies. But whether or not this would be sufficient to topple a world order defended in the interests of the political and corporate elite remains to be seen. Perhaps, it is the sheer interdependence of the universe that COVID-19 underscores that might help us rethink our values in the interests of all of humanity rather than a privileged few.

There are marked challenges in containing the spread of the virus because of poor infrastructural development, poor health, welfare and educational facilities, and lack of decent housing, clean water and sanitation in many parts of the world. President Ramaphosa, in his addresses to the nation, indicated that focus on these issues would be sustained when the COVID-19 crisis is over. If this promise holds true, the losses born out of COVID-19 might produce some of the long-term gains that we have been struggling for – a less self-serving and corrupt government and one that is more responsive to the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable of our communities. While there is much talk of business unusual in this time of

crisis, there is the risk that we will revert to business as usual and that we will have to deal with the added negative and greater poverty inducing effects of COVID-19 into the future.

Many people question the *why* of COVID-19 from a metaphysical point of view. Is it, as Dr Sanjay Gupta says, Mother Nature trying to send us a message? Is it another Biblical warning of God's wrath upon humanity for abusing the abundance that we have? Is it cosmic justice for the collective karmic load generated by humankind? Is COVID-19, with its short-term destruction and death, going to save the world from long-term annihilation? There are no answers to the *why*, but what we do know is that it is our values and our actions that determine how this invisible danger is managed. Destruction is the essence of the virus, just as much as divinity is the essence of humanity which we have disconnected from in our attachment to the non-realities of our world of appearances. With conspiracy theories abounding, we might not even be certain about the where and how of the origins of COVID-19. But, at this stage, that is not the most important. We must have humility and wisdom enough to listen to the empirical data that scientists are bringing us – and not be influenced by the partisan views of politicians who use COVID-19 to further their selfish political agendas. What is important is dedicated and motivated human action to stem the spread of the virus, the mitigation of its effects, finding effective treatment to prevent the deaths of those who are infected, and the production a vaccine that would be humanity's saving grace. In this motivating human action, we must strengthen the threads of unity, cooperation, love, care, compassion, understanding, empathy, and solidarity.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author declares no conflict of interest in the writing and publication of this article.

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