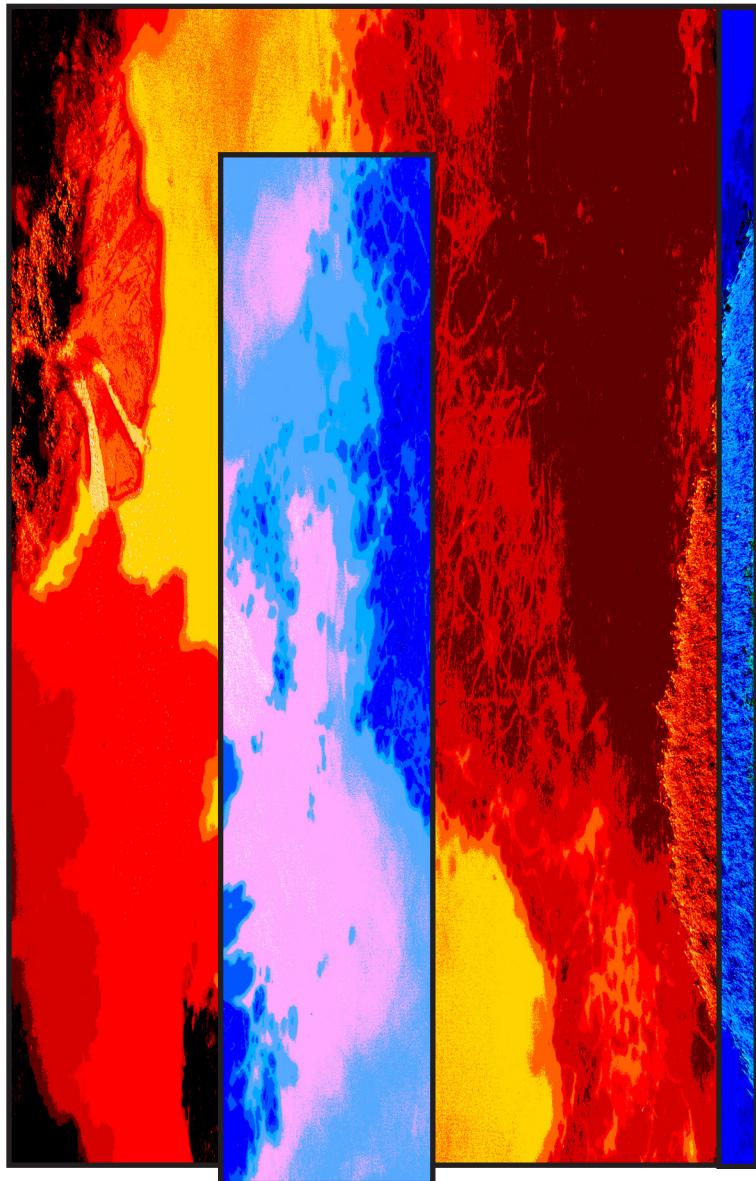


# THE BORDER CROSSES ALL

about the proliferation of  
borders in a pandemic world.

**From the occupied territory of so-called Australia.  
Stolen land, never ceded.**



Pieced together in 2020, finished in April 2021.

w: [darknessoutside.home.blog](http://darknessoutside.home.blog)

**“When the flames engulfed the home of the brave,  
The stampede towards the border was in vain.  
Faces palmed, faces paled,  
As the wall they said would make them great  
could not be scaled.”**

- *Victory Lap* by Propagandhi

## 1. CLOSED

The nation closes its borders. This is both remarkable and not. Unremarkable because the militarised border regime that has governed the political trajectory of this island nation had easily created the capacity to enforce a total shutdown. It ordinarily walks the line between living up to the racist fantasies of a paranoid population and the economic need for certain types of migration to fill gaps in the labour market. But these aren't ordinary times and so it flexes and the racists swoon while the 'progressive' liberals are appeased in their sense of (bio-)security.

## 2. CROSSING

I was caught off-guard when internal borders had initially been enforced between states, separating me from family and friends in the city that I had grown up in. I didn't want to overreact to a situation that is violently enforced upon so many people across the world, while I was able to ride it out in a position of relative comfort and security. Yet a disconcerting sense of separation grew when, between lockdowns, I'd tried to get back there a couple of times and plans had fallen through each time.

And then there was a new outbreak and a much more intensive lockdown and now all the other states were strictly enforcing this border between me and people I loved. The question arose – how long will I be cut off for? Like most things to do with this pandemic – like nearly everything about the day-to-day of this year – there is a sense of *un-reality* and imbalance to my mind's wanderings. And so I imagine finding ways to cross the state

border, hear stories of backroads and guides through the mountainous regions.

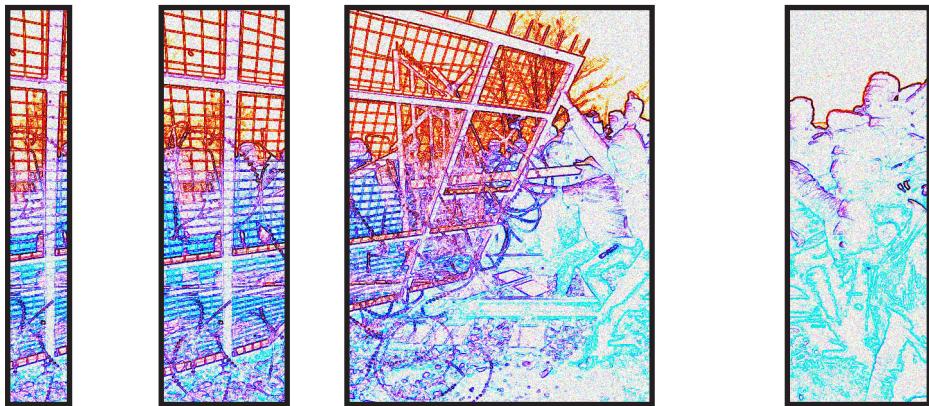
It's true that I've come to romanticise the act of crossing borders. The movement of people – rebels – refusing to be contained by the borders of the white world, erected by nation-states and colonisation for the benefit of capital. From north Africa, crossing the Mediterranean to Europe; up through the spine of the Americas and into the desert to breach the US border; from Asia and down across the seas to Australian waters.

I know this romanticisation risks diminishing the danger and desperation that so many people face as they move to find better lives. But I am also not interested in replicating the white humanitarian saviour relation to migrants, a perception of helpless brown and black people who need rescuing. I'm here to respect the bravery, resourcefulness and survival-skills of people doing what they need to in the face of ever-increasingly militarised borders.

## 3. ACCESS

Before the reality of the pandemic fully imposed itself on this continent, the paranoid gaze of the nation had already turned to where its focus has long been fascinated: Asia. Haunting the imaginary of the white colonists is the spectre of the hordes to the north, carrying the dual threat of infestation and infection. That the virus was first identified, and likely originated in Wuhan, was all the spur that was needed. In early February, Ella Shi wrote about growing anti-Chinese racism, placing this moment in a historical trajectory where, "since Chinese immigrants first came to work in Australia's goldfields, we've been the subject of racism and persecution on the basis that we're dirty and uncivilised".

The initial surge of anti-Chinese racism had immediate effects in the scapegoating and sudden locking out of international students who had individually paid tens of thousands of dollars into a critical sector of this nation's economy. I'm not interested in measuring worth based on economic contributions, but the hypocrisy is worth pointing out. Useful when they were a crutch on which the economy could support itself, then – just as a new university year was due to begin – they were discarded and left without societal support amidst a global crisis, left to pick up the



pieces in the face of a panicking higher education sector, racist landlords and a hostile government.

Borders do not only define the exterior limits of a nation-state, they are a lived condition that is reproduced within the very pores of society. They demarcate a right to *access*, a right to *be* or to *be peripheral*, drawing lines between the legible citizen and those who are some combination of illegible and 'other'. A series of categorisations, laws and visa restrictions are implemented to safeguard how the illegible (not white) 'other' can exist within white, colonial society, always ensuring a marginalised position.

In a beautifully written article connecting the dots between the lives of precarious workers from the Indian subcontinent, the anti-Muslim crackdown by authoritarian Indian prime minister Narendra Modi, the COVID-19 pandemic, temporary working visas and Australian border politics, Sanmati Verma points out that "by August, biostatistical maps of Melbourne mark a colour line. Suburbs with the highest incidence of the virus are those with the densest migrant populations and the highest percentage of people in casual or informal work". In times of crisis – whether ecological, economic or now, suddenly epidemiological – borders do their most dirty work, ensuring as much of the fallout or risk can be transposed upon segments of the population already considered marginal to the nation-state's most valued citizenry. It is an exclusionary logic that anyone who willingly invests in the functions of liberal democracy aligns themselves with.

## 4. SEPARATION

The most immediate social effect of the pandemic on most of us is separation. Lines are drawn at every level to keep the virus at bay. We have social distancing to ensure our bodily separation from others; we stay indoors and restrict visitors, keeping our households closed off; suburbs deemed 'hotspots' are locked down and limits are put on daily movement delineating neighbourhoods within the city; checkpoints on the highways prevent travel between the city and the country; state borders close and re-open; national borders stay shut. To point this out isn't to say that keeping ourselves apart wasn't necessarily an important step in limiting the transmission of COVID-19.

It is to say that all of this drawing of lines has an affective component that goes beyond feelings of isolation: it conditions us to implement separation at all points of our lives, to be wary of what is outside our bubbles. It is the work that the borders of nation's states do for the nationalist's paranoid need for racial sanctity. It is also, unfortunately, the effect that the functioning of 'safer spaces' can have within radical milieus, creating a nervous cautiousness about outsiders. The dual nature of walling off a protected space and fear of what is outside that space becomes a feedback loop that intensifies with time.

The fear of contagion from outside is a thread that binds long histories of racism and violence at the border – as already referenced earlier in this piece in relation to 'dirty' Chinese immigrants, a common racist adjective used against the full spectrum of people of colour. In *Necropolitics*, Achille Mbembe describes the work of colonisation as enforcing a permanent physical and psychological separation, one that creates a paranoid existence where "settlers lived in fear of being surrounded on all sides by 'bad objects' that threatened their very survival and were ever liable to take away their existence: natives, wild beasts, reptiles, microbes, mosquitoes, nature, the climate, illnesses, even sorcerers". Within settler-colonial society, the almost unconditional acceptance of borders does not separate itself from these fears and paranoias, and in the present of this pandemic it has built upon them by adding an indisputable medical-scientific rationale.

Now that a hyper-vigilance against the contagion lurking all around us is deemed common sense, it is accepted that the lines of separation need to be policed with punitive authority by the State (and by each other).

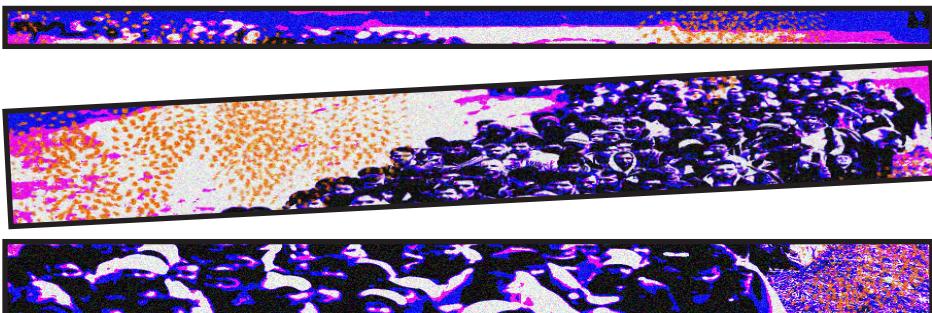
And it's hard to not fear the permanent ways that the affective resonance of all these borders – fear of 'the Other', fear of contagion, fear of being contaminated by 'the Other', racism – will enmesh further into the psyche of this society. Donatella Di Cesare refers to an 'immunitarian democracy', an extension of liberal democracy where the greatest social desire is to be protected – to be immunised against prospective outside contagions. She describes how:

The politics of immunization always and in every case pushes back against otherness. The border becomes the *cordon sanitaire*. All that comes from the outside reignites fear, reawakens the trauma which the citizen body believed that it had immunized itself against.

As much as this has always been somewhat the case, the current gravitational pull of medical-scientific expertise within the pandemic and its entanglement with the enforcement of borders seems like a particularly visible shift. There is very little possibility of thinking outside the field of limits it has determined to keep us safe, and this involves the categorisation and prescription of different zones and the people within them into those that can cross-pollinate and those that must be excluded. The work of borders will only amplify in the stage of the pandemic when vaccinations start to be administered and their effectiveness within populations scrutinised. Di Cesare adds that:

The citizen of an immunitarian democracy, precluded from sharing in the experience of the other, resigns herself to following all the rules of health and hygiene. Indeed, she has no difficulty in recognizing herself as a patient... Political action tends to take on a medical modality, while medical practice becomes politicized.

The rationale demands an absolutist implementation, excluding nearly all social affections and prioritising an over-cautiousness that is soon indistinguishable from fear and paranoia.



## 5. MOVEMENT

Every week I borrow a car and head out into streets I don't know well, taking me into the landscapes of outer metropolitan Melbourne. At the height of the lockdown – and in the absence of the usual furious buzz of motorists – driving around out here takes on a surreal sense of idyllic haziness, making the ordinary suburban monotony seem almost picturesque. I'm delivering loads of food staples for RISE to its members all across town. Some days it feels like work, but mostly I'm happy to have a reason to be out of the house, to transgress the borders of the 5km zone that we're meant to stay within.

Despite the layers of separation that have been imposed by the pandemic, there are various forms in which the limits of borders are being transgressed as people find ways to connect to each other, support each other and struggle. The most obvious examples are in the various mutual aid initiatives that pop up. While staying safe and preventing the transmission of the virus are important considerations for all of these, the capacity to acquire and distribute needed resources generally involves numerous moments of moving between and around the lines that the state sets and enforces. While the virus defines life as we know it in these times, it can't be allowed to be a reason to negate struggles for liberation.

As much as it will feel like a relief when restrictions start easing and it becomes easier to go out and find each other again, it also feels wrong to so readily speak of returning to 'normality' even as national borders remain closed to people trying to get here. I'll admit that I have selfish reasons for pointing this out – I want to go the other way, to have time away from here and the reactionary politics and general lack of ability to sustain vibrant and militant forms of resistance in this country. And I feel trapped knowing that I cannot – and probably should not – go. I understand that these self-interested reasons form part of the motivation for my thinking about borders and I feel ok being able to hold them in perspective.

Away from individual desires, the deepest concerns are about the new layers of restrictions on movement being permanent, a closure that can't be pried back open. Of course, borders 'opening' might only return us to the previous situation of highly restricted and racialized forms of movement, precarious visa arrangements and offshore detention centres. Or more realistically a frightening combination of pandemic

exclusions due to biosecurity and those prior conditions on movement tied to economic requirements and the flows of capital. Sanmati Verma describes this dystopian “future in which subjugated labour is free to move across borders, subject to heightened biopolitical management, and free to toil on roads, farms and factories while citizens remain cloistered in their homes”.

The deadly work of the virus cannot flippantly be considered an opportunity for social change – apart from the numbers of dead, it has also resulted in an intensification of social control. However, in the face of this we can be brave enough to not just wish upon a return to a ‘normality’ that was never right anyway or to find succour in the securitisation of distance. Instead, we might make new moves from a changed social and global terrain.

## 6. RISK

Instead of thinking purely in terms of strengthening borders, immunity and protection, I’m interested in following the thread that Di Cesare leads us to, inverting this focus and emphasising movement, commonality and risk instead. She says that “the opposite of the immune is the common”, going on to explain that “the common indicates the sharing of a mutual obligation... To be part of a community means to be linked, bound to each other, constantly exposed, ever-vulnerable”. To imagine shifting the instinctive response to crisis as being one which demands more disciplinarian or authoritarian regimes and more borders, we have to allow ourselves to be exposed, vulnerable and changed by what surrounds us. Recognising this doesn’t necessarily mean precluding the value that medical expertise provides, it means contextualising that expertise within a broader social and global context. It means asking (and acting upon) a series of questions related not just to this pandemic, but to all moments of social crisis, struggle and antagonism.

How is risk proportionated amongst different bodies and communities? What forms of risk are necessary in struggling against a social order that reproduces continuous forms of domination? How can risk be shared? Does resistance require some of us to take on more risk than others? Ultimately, does the risk of being exposed and changed bring more value to our lives and the struggles we partake in than the certainties we try to enmesh ourselves within by walling off the outside?

# TEXTS

Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (book)

Donatella Di Cesare, 'Immunatarian Democracy' from illwill.com

Ella Shi, 'Naming the racism that spreads along with Coronavirus' from overland.org.au

Sanmati Verma, 'We won't show our papers' from peril.com.au

