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Jo Sharp

Published online: 25 Apr 2022.

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Jo Sharp

School of Geography and Sustainable Development, University of St Andrews, St Andrews, Scotland

ABSTRACT
COVID-19 has brought to unavoidable prominence what feminist geopolitics has long insisted, namely that the global and the intimate are always, everywhere, already entangled. Drawing on Anglo-American experiences of the pandemic, this paper aims to make two key arguments. The first is that feminist geopolitics is a conceptual approach that is perhaps uniquely placed to make sense of COVID geographies. The second is to propose that this account of COVID speaks back to recent debates about the future of feminist geopolitics. Reflecting on recent debates about possible futures for feminist geopolitics, the paper will make the case for a materially-engaged feminist geopolitics which nevertheless keeps the socially-marked body at the heart of analysis.

1. Introduction

The virus is out there. We have to confront it. But let's confront it like men, not like women.

Jair Bolsanaro (March 2020)

Might as well carry a purse with that mask, Joe [Biden]
Fox News host Tomi Lahren (October 2020)

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to attention two things. First, that we are embedded within material assemblages, something evident to me living in the UK, in the reconfiguration of private spaces to avoid contact with an invisible virus, the constant estimation of 2 m distance when I am out, and in my conscious awareness of the touch of a mask but not of friends or family. And, second, that in these assemblages, bodies are marked and placed

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CONTACT Jo Sharp ✉ js314@st-andrews.ac.uk School of Geography and Sustainable Development, University of St Andrews, St Andrews, Scotland

and valued differently. At the heart of the current pandemic is a politics of the body, made and remade through the entangled geographies of: the most intimate politics of care, protection, illness and hygiene; state politics of health, regulation and vaccine nationalism; and international politics of transmission, geopolitics and trade. Thus, COVID-19 has brought to unavoidable prominence what feminist geopolitics has long insisted, namely that the global and the intimate are always, everywhere, already entangled.

In this paper I want to propose a material feminist geopolitical account of COVID-19 that recognises the possibility for vital collectivities through material assemblage, while also being attentive to the representational politics that place bodies within these assemblages differently. I will argue that what is most important for feminist geopolitics in the concept of materialities is the way in which we are dependent upon wider collectivities of people and things—something that the COVID pandemic has made clear despite attempts by some political leaders to fit it into a conventional geopolitical narrative (see Hyndman 2021). After a brief discussion of feminist geopolitics, the paper will move on to engage with medical anthropology literatures that seek to relate viral materialities to the construction of self through a militarised imagining of the immune system. The paper's last substantive sections will tease out some of the global-intimacies of COVID-19 evident in Anglo-America. In doing this, I want to make two key points. The first is to propose that feminist geopolitics is uniquely placed to make sense of the complex geographies of the COVID pandemic. The second is to propose that this account of COVID speaks back to recent debates about the future of feminist geopolitics. Drawing on recent critiques of 'non-human feminist geopolitics of 'earthliness' [which…] truncate political possibilities by refusing to engage the individual subjects of 'conventional' feminist geopolitics' (Hyndman 2019, 3; see also Sharp 2021), the paper will make the case for a materially-engaged feminist geopolitics which nevertheless keeps the socially-marked body at the heart of analysis.

2. Feminist geopolitics

It is now 20 years since an agenda for a distinctly 'feminist geopolitics' was laid out. This sought to challenge the privileging of elite accounts of the world, and the discursive realm, that was characteristic of the first approaches to critical geopolitics. While critical geopolitics sought a restless critique of any representation of geopolitical space, it seemed to accept a bordering of the political when it came to setting apart the everyday, embodied realm from the space of high politics. A feminist approach to geopolitics sought instead to 'think more clearly of the grounding of geopolitical discourse in practice (and in place)—to link international representation to the geographies of everyday life; to understand the ways in which the nation and the

international are reproduced in the mundane practices we take for granted' (Dowler and Sharp 2001, 171). It has sought to extend the feminist critique of divisions of the domestic and the public through the performance of international politics, to highlight the significance of supposedly non-political spaces and processes in the making of geopolitics, the enforcement of borders and identities, and the exclusion and marginalization of a variety of others.

What has distinguished feminist geopolitics specifically from a broader project of feminist political geography is a core focus on the fact that the everyday material realm is understood to be always and already entangled with constructed scales of national and global identities and processes, as has been variously articulated subsequently as the 'global-intimate' (Pratt and Rosner 2012), the 'double-helix' (Pain and Smith 2008), or the 'domestication of geopolitics' (Woodyer and Carter 2020). This rejection of binaries, and the attention to 'the co-constitution of categories like the public and private, war and peace, civilian and soldier' (Christian, Dowler, and Cuomo 2016, 66), produces an understanding of a continuum which complicates distinctions between domestic and global space, and where intimate violence and fear are held alongside state violence and war as 'a single complex of violence' (Pain 2015, 64; see also Christian, Dowler, and Cuomo 2016). Thus, feminist geopolitics has sought to make visible that which has been conveniently partitioned off as private space, rendering acts of violence invisible, personal and somehow unrelated to 'formal' politics of the state (see Hyndman 2019). Initially this feminist geopolitics had an *implicit* materiality in its focus upon the lived and embodied experiences of the geopolitical, rather than an overtly theorised one. Since then, there has been a flourishing of feminist geopolitical work and both this and the wider critical geopolitical community have sought to further engage with the ways in which the intimate, everyday and domestic are entangled within the remaking of geopolitics in different ways (although the specifically feminist genealogy of this is not always acknowledged by critical geopolitics) (see Sharp 2007; Cowen and Story 2013; Massaro and Williams 2013; Pain 2015; Jackman and Brickell 2022).

In response to Geography's turn to 'new materiality' (Coole and Frost 2010) and 'vibrant matter' (Bennet 2010), some scholars have sought to challenge spatial divisions (such as scalar politics or the division of space into global and domestic) through a more explicitly theorized material, most notably through the concept of assemblage (e.g. Dittmer (2014), Dixon (2015), see Sharp (2021)). Assemblage thinking recognises the place of material, non-human agents and technologies in the making of our worlds thus moving towards more vital accounts of it (Bennet 2010). Barry (2013, 414) highlights the importance of relations between agents in actor network theory where, he argues, 'the actor does not refer to an individual agent,

but rather an entity whose existence depends upon their network of alliances within a shifting heterogeneous and expansive relational field'. Thus, identity changes as it 'enters into, or is enrolled or mobilised into, a field of relations with other entities' (Barry 2013, 414). Rather than accepting boundaries and hierarchies as fixed and pre-existing, assemblage thinking sees them as coming into being relationally. This recognition of interdependence is entirely compatible with feminist geopolitics' prioritising of the always-already entangled spaces of the global-intimate, although the emphasis differs. For example, in her proposal for a materialist geopolitics, Squire (2015, 148) emphasises the materiality of the fact that individuals are *always* simultaneously individual and collective beings, always tied to a wider context beyond themselves as individuals. It is the collectivity that emerges through the material creation of publics—of bodies in particular spaces, at particular times—where I believe materialism offers most to feminist geopolitics. Judith Butler's (2012; 2015) account also ensures that cognisance of the needs and capabilities of bodies are the focal point of such enrolment. This *cannot* be an entirely separated, Enlightenment-individual body, because she is conscious that its capacities are created through its connectivity with, and dependence upon, other actants.

> Human action depends on all sorts of supports—it is always supported action. We know from disability studies that the capacity to move depends on instruments and surfaces that make movement possible and that bodily movement is supported and facilitated by nonhuman subjects and their particular capacity for agency. (Butler 2012, 118).

This breaking up of the subject of geopolitics from the singular, bounded body, to more-than-human assemblage seems to be a logical extension of the feminist geopolitical move to challenge any attempt to bound 'the political'. Its drawing in of the more-than-human is also important, especially in these COVID times when we are clearly reminded of the vitality of matter—be it viruses, vaccines or cloth masks—in the making of our geopolitical lives. Medical anthropological work on the relationship between viral matter, bodies and self presents provocative ways of thinking through the global-intimate in COVID times.

3. Viruses, borders, bodies and the self

> Signaling a 'ubiquity of epidemiological encounters in the so-called age of networks,' viruses are in fact masters of undetectable mobility across highly invested borders on multiple scales, from those drawn between bodies to those that demarcate species and nations. These multiplying and unruly mobilities of the virus are what make the virus such a source of fascination and fear, not only because of their initially unapparent and promiscuous movement across body-species-nation boundaries but also because of the virus's attendant capacity to set into motion continual flux, rapid mutation, and transformation. In other words, it is not merely

viral 'contamination' or infection per se that is frightening, it is also the capacity that the virus holds for 'uncontrolled and unstoppable diffusion throughout all the productive nerve centers of our lives.' Emerging 'at the edge of life,' viruses challenge integrities of all kinds, unmaking or dissolving the boundaries between bodies, species, and nations. (White 2015, 141)

Although by the time it spread from the wet markets of Wuhan COVID-19 was being transmitted from person to person, it was originally a zoonotic disease, hopping species from animal to human. While around 60% of human diseases are thought to have zoonotic origins, there is concern that these species 'spillover' events are happening more frequently in the Anthropocene where human activities are bringing previously distanced animal populations into closer proximity (Quammen 2012). Of course, the discovery in November 2020 of a new form of the virus in Danish mink farms where the disease that had leapt from animal to human had leapt back and forth one more time, only emphasises the vitality of these interspecies connections (*The Guardian* 2020).

Zoonoses present an unruly challenge to biopolitical practices of biosecurity, threatening to cross the species barriers between people and other animals. The 'propensity for continually emerging as other-than-themselves' renders zoonotic viruses as agents that potentially unsettle the international (White 2015, 142) destabilising its very foundational geopolitical building blocks (see also Puar 2017). And now with international connectivity providing the means for pathogens to cross the globe in less than 24 hours, this can happen in the most mundane of settings—shoppers in Wuhan unwittingly starting a chain of connection that leads to a pandemic.

Conventionally, biosecurity presupposes a separate 'safe' pathogen-free 'inside' from a 'dangerous' diseased 'outside'. And it is certainly this imagination of viral geopolitics that stretches from former President Trump's attempt to label COVID-19 as 'the China virus', through maps of apparently 'safe' and 'risky' places (at all scales); it lies behind the drive to identify the outbreak narrative which pinpoints the 'spillover' event, tracking patient zero and the subsequent contagion from 'diseased' to 'healthy' spaces (Wald's [2008, 887] work on the history of pandemics suggests that it is 'not unusual for a virus to be described as a foreigner or even an immigrant'). This is the invocation of Latour's (1993) critique of modernity at its most extreme—the idea that somehow humanity is pure, untainted, separate from the messiness of the natural and thus invaded by unruly matter (see Hinchliffe et al. 2017).

Medical anthropologists have argued that understandings of disease and of the threat of disease, are fundamental to our sense of ourselves. In pre-COVID-19 times David Napier has explored this in the western understandings of the self that is implied in the concept of immunity. He has shown that the very concept of an 'immune system' was only conceptualised in the 1960s, when it emerged into the Cold War geopolitical mindset, and

was thus imagined through a militarised sense of vulnerability and protection. Immunology courses at medical schools took titles such as 'microbes and defense', while popular accounts imagined 'the body at war' in its elimination of infectious diseases. In short, Napier explained, 'the body was seen as a fortress, and the immune system its mechanism of defense' (Napier 2012, 119). From the start, then, the immune system has been understood as 'global-intimate'.

The 'science of immunology' coalesced around 'the idea that immunity once acquired stood principally as a mechanism of defence and boundary maintenance' (Napier 2012, 123). But this was based around the science of bacteriology where living infectious agents do often struggle against each other, reinforcing the idea that immunity is a process 'by which some autonomous, selfish being raised defense against invasive agents through an orchestrated recognition and elimination of otherness' (Napier 2012, 120).

However, viruses are a different kind of matter. Unlike bacteria, strictly-speaking virus are not alive, not until they enter our cells. An article in a recent issue of UCL Medical Anthropology explains this:

> Etymologically, the English word virus stems from the Latin meaning 'poison, slime, venom'—an invisible yet harmful substance, something more akin to a noxious chemical than a biological life-form. Yet viruses—submicroscopic parasites constituted of cores of nucleic acid surrounded by proteins—are essential entities in shaping the constitution of biological life. As infectious agents, viruses need host organisms to survive and proliferate. They do not have nuclei or mitochondria, like biological cells, but do contain genetic material (RNA and DNA). (Gibbon et al. 2020)

Crucially—for the case of a virus like COVID-19—it is only the process of entering into combination with our own biological matter that gives viruses life, which leads Napier to wonder:

> Might it be that our persistent characterizations of viruses as active agents arises partly from the *cultural* belief that harboring otherness within us is principally dangerous, a belief whereby a persistent 'self' must in turn always be protected against things 'foreign'?…[But] How can viral antigens be considered *foreign* invaders if *our own cells animate viruses?*' (Napier 2012, 128, 129, emphasis in original).

Instead, he continues

> viruses do not invade us. We, *for better or worse, bring life to the sometimes dangerous encounters that define the limits of who we are*, that limit what we can be, and that (hopefully) do so without taking the very life that those viruses, once embodied, now *inform*—or, as we used to say, *infect*. (Napier 2012, 133, emphasis in original).

For Napier this revelation provides a provocation towards understandings of the self. Rather than achieving the Cartesian image of pre-existent, whole and separate containers, our bodies are constantly being remade through interactions with viruses—not external invaders but the very stuff that makes

life possible. This challenges the Enlightenment sense of the coherent, separate and knowing self. Just as with the assemblage geopolitics noted in the previous section, this understanding of immunity renders human bodies open to and dependent upon networks of materiality that cross bodily barriers, which I will now explore through the intimate-global geopolitics of the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. The intimate-global geopolitics of COVID

Experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic have brought into clear focus the fact we are 'living with' a variety of matter: our social and geopolitical relations are dependent upon—and interrupted by—viruses and vaccines, are contained within cloth masks, and the confines or luxury of our homes. Such recognition of 'vibrant matter' (Bennet 2010) would seem to sit comfortably with the materialisms of some recent articulations of critical and feminist geopolitics discussed earlier.

And yet, the COVID-19 pandemic is not just a story about the deterritorialization of matter into fluid assemblage. While viral vitality can seem to scramble our theoretical certainties, when COVID coalesces around bodies, it seems mainly to reinforce neoliberal biopolitics. Certain bodies are rendered disposable in order to protect others. In the case of human and animal health, Shukin (2009, 183) insists that the biomodality of the twenty-first century is 'suggestive of a radical ontological breakdown of species distinction and distance under present conditions of global capitalism'. This points to an alignment of the 'othering' of the non-human and the non-western in which, in the face of pandemic threat, 'the sacrifice of potentially infectious (non-human) bodies so that others (humans) may live, […] simultaneously distinguish[es] racial ontologies in the global species body of humanity' (Shukin 2009, 196; see also Davis and Sharp 2000). Whether the rapid cull of infected Danish mink to protect humans from COVID-19, noted earlier, or the differential racial burden of COVID impacts that have been reported throughout the pandemic, existing lines of otherness are being reinscribed. Initial claims that the pandemic was democratic, that it did not respect status, wealth or nationality have been shown to be hopelessly naïve. Rather than transcend difference or destabilising international norms, in most ways the pandemic has reinforced them.

Early studies demonstrate that there are clear patterns to both the risk of catching COVID and the impact it will have when caught (see, for example, Andrews et al. 2021). Initially the greater impact on black and minority communities was linked to genetics and co-morbidities such as diabetes and high blood pressure, just as there seems to be genetic reasons for greater impact on men than women. But it soon became clear that social, economic and cultural explanations for the differences were more compelling.

In the UK the highest rates of infection and mortality have been in Black and Asian British communities, especially in the north-west of England where there are high rates of poverty, poor health, overcrowding in housing; ethnic minorities are over-represented in the care sector and in the frontline service industry leaving them more vulnerable to transmission (Dorling 2020). Lockdown measures, as Simpson (2021: 1) has put it, 'have operated in a manner that insulate some by exposing others, and do so along existing axes of structural inequality—namely race, class, gender and citizenship […] quarantine is a logic which determines whose bodies are shielded from risk, or 'immunized' (Esposito 2013), by the bodies of others.' For instance, in the UK, one outbreak of COVID was linked to sweatshop conditions in a garment factory in Leicester, while in the US outbreaks were linked to meat processing plants. The arrival of COVID-19 has drawn out erstwhile conveniently hidden ideology of (biopolitical) capitalism:

> That capital is seen as the source of life and whatever stands in its way stands against life—and exposed its racial and necropolitical logics, as wealthy white urbanites fled to countryside retreats or safely worked from home, while 'essential' workers—disproportionately BIPOC and precarious—were left exposed, employed in dangerous jobs, and often burdened with pre-existing conditions that reflect the slow violence of racial capitalism (Braun 2008, Lunstrum et al. 2021, 9).

Ahuja (2021, 4) notes that the death rate for COVID-19 in New York City was twice as high for Black residents than white, a fact that leads him to Gilmore's (2002, 261) definition of racism as the 'capacity to create "group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death"' (Christian, Dowler, and Cuomo (2016) have argued that feminist geopolitics needs to be attentive to this kind of convergence between slow and fast violence).

This highlights what medical geographers and anthropologists talk of as the biosocial nature of disease. Accounts of diseases like COVID that focus only on their biological aspects, tend to over-emphasise patient agency in controlling the disease—people are blamed for making poor health decisions, there is a belief that all they need is education and they should behave better, thus benefitting from better health outcomes (Farmer 2001). But a biosocial approach recognises the social, economic and cultural contexts that shape disease, not just leaving some types of people more vulnerable to catching it, but fundamentally shaping the experience, impacts and meaning of the disease if they succumb to it. Hinchliffe and colleagues explains it thus:

> For us, it is the configuration of various matters and living processes that makes life more or less healthy. So, rather than focus on pathogens and their exclusion from everyday living spaces as a means to address the threat of emerging disease, we take a different tack. … pathogenicity, a word we use to highlight that infectious disease is always more than a matter for pathogens alone. […] Pathogenicity is in this understanding borne out of the kinds of relations that hosts have with bacteria

and viruses, their vectors and so on. A healthy host within a healthy population and environment is likely, for example, to reduce the pathogenicity of a microbe. In conditions of vulnerability, however, an otherwise inconsequential infection can take on life-threatening qualities. (Hinchliffe et al. 2017, xiii-xiv).

Just as with Napier's reformulation of the individual body and viral contagion, public health cannot start by drawing on conventional geopolitics which imagine safe pathogen-free spaces awaiting infection from elsewhere/outside. Instead, it must recognise the global-intimate of feminist geopolitics, and so consider an assemblage of forces—human, non-human animal, material, viral, bacterial, economic, political, social—which have the potential to combine in different ways that can have positive outcomes where bodies are healthy and well supported, or negative ones where the biosocial intersections leave bodies vulnerable to infection and illhealth.

Staying at home is a luxury that only some can afford, and it is becoming increasingly clear that one of the key long-term effects of COVID-19 will be increasingly levels of inequality. Women are over-represented in the care and healthcare industries, but women's vulnerability has been increased as a result of COVID-control measures with marked increases in domestic violence and expectations for women to take on home-schooling and additional childcare (see Agius, Bergman, and Kinnvall 2020; Bambra and Smith 2021). Furthermore, much has been written about the K-shaped recovery that is anticipated as large swathes of people lose their jobs while many of the wealthiest have seen their fortunes increase significantly. Chillingly, it is clear that some 'disaster capitalists' (Klein 2007; Solis 2020) have done particularly well from the pandemic. That *during* the pandemic Trump withdrew the US from the WHO and in the UK the Johnston government has sought to disband Public Health England and transfer services to the private sector, suggests that more profit is anticipated from this current disaster (see also Lunstrum et al. 2021). As Ahuja (2016, 270) has put it bluntly, 'necropower is not simply about the distribution of death; it is also about the accumulation of social or economic capital through death and precarity'. This brings into clear focus Yusoff's (2018, 107) powerful indictment of the racial foundations of Anthropocene capitalism, 'predicated on the presumed absorbent qualities of black and brown bodies to take up the body burdens of exposure to toxicities and to buffer the violence of the earth.'

COVID geopolitics, then, demonstrates clearly the need for attentiveness to the social power the positions bodies differently in relation to the pandemic which has implications for how feminist geopolitics might engage with the concept of material assemblages. In her feminist critique of assemblage geographies, Kincaid (2020, 459) fears that the 'emphasis on material politics, has abandoned 'traditional' social categories such as class, gender and ethnicity'. For Kincaid, any feminist engagement with assemblage must

prioritise the ways in which assemblage flows and connections are organised through social, political and representational categories such as race, gender and sexuality (see also Puar 2017).

While at the core of feminism is a mistrust of any binaries—whether these are the spatial divisions of public and private or the more vital ones of the division between human and non-human matter—attentiveness to embeddedness within assemblage must include mapping of power through these networks. Without this, Kinkaid (2020, 464) fears, 'assemblage thinking fails to render visible the operations of power and is poorly equipped to address the question of how symbolic-material differentials are maintained and endure'.

Retaining the material body at the centre of feminist geopolitics is so important, I would argue, precisely because it is 'through the *differential* positioning of bodies in different assemblages of things—*and* the very different representations of different sorts of bodies in these assemblages—that different capabilities and prospects emerge' (Sharp 2021, 995). This, then, is not a fully vitalist account. Material is not free to be itself when tied to bodies if we recognise the stabilizing powers of dominant representation, what Weheliye (2014, 5) calls the 'socio-political process of differentiation and hierachization, which are projected onto the putatively human body', a process we can see all too clearly in the playing out of the COVID-19 pandemic. The next section will draw on the example of masks to argue for the need to prioritise the body at the heart of feminist geopolitics.

5. Masks, masculinities, and material feminist geopolitics

There is no escaping the fact that the politics of the body is at the forefront of COVID geopolitics. But this is not just in the sick body; perhaps the most potent bodily inscription of geopolitics—certainly the most visible and apparently symbolic one—is in the politics of the mask. The apparently simple act of covering one's mouth and nose to contain potentially COVID-laden droplets has become deeply embodied in Anglo-American 'culture wars', invoked in the very definition of the self. On the surface, a mask acts as a barrier between a person and others, something apparently separating individuals, and yet, its meaning is now deeply contested. For some it has become a statement that, 'I am part of this collective'; for others, the rejection of the mask on the other hand, is presented as a claim to autonomous individuality: 'I will not be muzzled'. Masks powerfully embody a shared vulnerability at the same time as reinforcing belonging to a community of care, but this is a differentiated embodiment, as Bhasin et al. note (2020, 930), in '[t]he US, masking is often associated with women and femininity, partly due to the discursive connection between mask wearing and concern for broader community.' They also highlight research that successful masculine norms in the US (those that lead to higher social status), are associated with

risk taking and 'showing no weakness'. From this perspective, they note, 'wearing a mask emasculates' (Glick (2020) quoted in Bhasin et al. (2020, 930; see also Palmer and Peterson 2020).

Masks have different connotations when brought together in different assemblages, of bodies, genders, cultures and spaces, as Rebecca Solnit has most famously noted:

> Masks in the US are widely understood as self-protection, while the Asian practice of wearing masks while potentially contagious is intended to protect others. I also saw on social media someone complain that white men were refusing to wear masks with floral patterns because they were interested in protecting, first, their masculinity, and saw others note that for black men floral and festive patterns were desirable ways of defusing the racist perceptions of them as threatening. Other black men are afraid to wear masks at all, for fear it will heighten the racist perception of them as menacing or criminal. (Solnit 2020)

This proliferation of meaning then is read through the 'socio-political process of differentiation and hierachization', again to echo Weheliye (2014, 5), projected onto the body, a body that is racialised and gendered. Women are supposed to be caring but for some men, this performance of care, in the context of a wider crisis of hegemonic, white, heteronormative masculinity presents another boundary war, as the quotes I opened the paper with make all too clear—we must fight this virus as men, not hidden behind a mask.

Thus, it is perhaps no surprise that it's the countries which have most aggressively pursued neoliberal agendas where there is the most resistance to wearing masks. This language and discourses of individualism, competition and the free market, have worked against an imagination of a social contract and responsibility. There has been a tendency for the Westminster government in the UK to draw on a politics of blame of individual (ir)responsibility in failing to follow lockdown regulations, rather than any acknowledgement of the structural conditions (overcrowding, job insecurity, poverty) that forces certain types of people into riskier behaviour.

It has been notable the different levels of compliance in mask-wearing between these parts of England and the other countries comprising the UK—in Scotland where the parliament has pursued more socially equitable policies within the confines of devolved powers, it has been noted that there is considerably higher adherence to the policy which has faced much more opposition down south (Reicher 2021). But of course, it is in the USA where the refusal to wear masks has apparently been most closely entangled with performances of toxic masculinity, entwined with similar arguments about the right to bear arms—and the confrontations that have emerged do so within the threat or actuality of violence. As Harsin (2020, 1065) has explained, this individual response to the politics of the mask is the result of wider issues:

> Toxic emo-truth politics are contagious, for toxic masculinist responses to coronavirus are a populist mirror reflection of those spotlighted by executive emo-truth-tellers.

> Arguably, the most disturbingly spectacular performance of unmasked toxicity was waged by armed men, who stormed the Michigan (USA) courthouse to intimidate law- makers before a vote to extend the lockdown. Their individual freedom allegedly 'threatened', […] These men demonstrated a disregard for truth claims about the seriousness and/or dangers of the virus or, perhaps more prominently, a disregard for the collective danger the virus posed through their 'if I get it, I get it; I'm not afraid', ferocious selfishness—who gives a damn if the virus will kill more elderly, immune-deficient, minority populations and so forth. Most importantly, I will *beat* it if I get it.

At the same time, it is revealing how quickly the mask has become a symbol of unity and solidarity amongst progressive and radical political groups—not just because of its help in confounding face recognition biometric systems and displaying political messaging, but also the recognition of the power of this display of concern for the health of the collective. The Black Lives Matter protests, in particular, have been notable in this regard, drawing out the chilling parallels between the biosocial inequalities in pandemic health and the systematic racism of institutions of policing, governance and education:

> 'I can't breathe' takes on a double meaning in the current political moment. COVID-19 disproportionately attacks the lungs of Black people exposed due to inadequate protection, while the knee of the carceral state continues to deprive the Black body of air. (Liebman, Rhiney, and Wallace 2020, 321; see also Hyndman 2021)

6. A (Slightly) hopeful conclusion?

Jennifer Hyndman (2019, 4) has recently questioned whether feminist geopolitics has 'outlived its usefulness as a once-original concept that analytically conceptualised violence and displacement in embodied ways' but I think that experiences of COVID-19 have vividly illustrated the need for analysis of how practices and representations of violence are reproduced through the global-intimate. Just as with my (2021) proposal for a materialist feminist geography, the focus on the material here is not a fully realised vital materiality. The forum of politics must include people and things, but we must recognise the ways in which the things are brought into the political; through debate, challenge, argument, distorted through existing structures of racism, patriarchy and capitalism. For this reason, I do not believe critical geopolitics can ever escape the discursive. The material here is the more-than-representational, rather than non-representational (Lorimer 2005).

While it is important to recognise the presence of material, and to understand the co-constitutive nature of bodies and things, representation and materiality, I have argued here that for a distinctively *feminist* geopolitics, it is the coalescence of these assemblages around bodies, and attentiveness to the politics of these bodies moving through different spaces, that is key. This way of considering the material in feminist geopolitics seeks to capture

both 'the fleshy materiality of bodies—individual speaking bodies, populations, injured bodies, body parts, dead bodies—*and* the ways in which these are brought to bear on the formation of geopolitical representation through various expert and everyday performances that render this flesh meaningful' (Sharp 2021, 1000).

This means that the language used to represent remains of vital importance. For some time, critics, most notably Susan Sontag (1989), have discussed the effects of militarised metaphors on conceptualisations of health, illness and the body, most notably the language of fights, battles and wars with cancer, as if, somehow succumbing to the disease was the result of a failure of effort. This militarisation of individual experiences with disease is connected to the geopolitics of COVID-19. Clayton (2021) highlights the 'barely noticed' militarisation of governmental narration of the 'war against an invisible enemy'. This language has 'worked to deflect the amateurism and incompetence of the UK Government's response to the virus (Clayton 2021). For Napier too the language we use to discuss viruses has significance beyond narrow concerns about health.

> First of all, if we persist in describing a virus as a 'threat', once it has gone into remission, we become quite vulnerable to the erroneous idea that we have somehow defeated it. In such a scenario, not only are we feeding our short-term collective memory instead of thinking about those leading precarious lives—that is, assuaging our pretensions about having defeated a common enemy so we can return complacently to whatever we had until recently defined as 'normal'—but also, we participate in fuelling the erroneous idea that securing our collective well-being is dependent on eliminating an outside challenge—the very thing, by the way, that fuels xenophobia. (Napier 2020, 2).

The ways in which populist leaders have sought to narrate the pandemic in conventional geopolitical terms thus reinforces the (masculinist) concept of a bounded subject, with an individualised (neoliberal) sense of responsibility. The drive to locate the origin of COVID-19 further illustrates this geopolitical imagination, 'since its source, always distant from ourselves in the fantasy land of our fears, gives us assurance that we are not at fault, that we have been invaded from without, that we have been polluted by some external agent' (Gilman 1988, cited in Brown 2011, 321; Brown et al. 2021). At the extreme, Trump's 'corona-nationalism,' provided 'a metaphor for a 'foreign infection' invading the body politic and bringing the nation down' (Agius, Bergman, and Kinnvall 2020, 447). Linking representations of 'the China virus' with performances of toxic white masculinity, through practices of national border reinforcement and vaccine nationalism, reinforces norms of geopolitical exclusion and identity politics at the national and individual scales.

But these have not been the only narratives to have emerged from the pandemic. Even in these dark times, there is hope: the 'mass uprisings that

link COVID-19 and policy murders within the perverse violence of racial capitalism have cracked open the "small fissure in the ongoing catastrophe'" (Liebman, Rhiney, and Wallace 2020, 334). Clayton (2021) draws on Mbembe (2020) to argue that the demand for an undivided 'right to breathe' refers not just to Covid-19 pandemic—which kills by taking the breath away—but also to a broader 'pathogenic… [and] catabolic period *par excellence*, with the decomposition of bodies, the sorting and expulsion of all sorts of human waste', and into which climate, capital, disease, environment, race, and the state all feed, spawning 'the damage we as humans wreak on the lungs of the earth and on its body'. When we are considering pandemic zoonotic threats such as COVID, this awareness of our vulnerabilities, responsibilities, entanglements and dependencies has to be material, stretching to other species and environments.

Feminists have, of course, long advocated for the importance of a relational politics centred around the figure of precarity, recognising the power of understanding shared vulnerability rather than the drive to containment and exclusion. Anna Tsing explains it as follows:

> Precarity is the condition of being vulnerable to others. Unpredictable encounters transform us; we are not in control, even of ourselves. Unable to rely on a stable structure of community, we are thrown into shifting assemblages, which remake us as well as our others. […] In order to survive, we need help, and help is always the service of another, with or without intent. When I sprain my ankle, a stout stick may help me walk, and I enlist its assistance. I am now an encounter in motion, a woman-and-stick. It is hard for me to think of any challenge I might face without soliciting the assistance of others, human and not human. It is unselfconscious privilege that allows us to fantasize—counterfactually—that we each survive alone. (Tsing (2015, 430, 548))

Through this rendering visible of our shared precarities and mutual dependencies, the pandemic has shown what changes *can* be made—things that have long been presented to us as inevitabilities are being revealed to be political choices, whether the ability to support all homeless people to the inclusivity to people with disabilities that the sudden embrace of digital working has facilitated; there are even mainstream discussions emerging about the virtues of a Universal Basic Income in place of benefits (for example, three of the four party leaders raised this possibility in the televised Leaders' Debates in April ahead of the Scottish Government election date from 2020 to 2021). Arundhati Roy (2020), goes further to note that, 'Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.'

Roy's challenge to us is how we choose to travel through this portal. While two years on her statement might look a little overly optimistic, it also reminds us that the politics of hope is a feminist one and that the first

step in challenging the apparent inevitabilities projected by dominant narratives is to provide space for a multiplicity of accounts that embody the present, and imagine the future, differently. The global-intimate of COVID-19 has revealed the precarious dependencies that make communities but also the deep inequalities that distributes this precarity with such inequity. A feminist geopolitics that centres the body as a locus for the continuum of violence that entangles the everyday and the global foregrounds these uneven precarious dependencies can, ultimately, seek to interrupt them. (Hyndman 2019; Sharp 2021).

Acknowledgments

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributor

Jo Sharp is Professor of Geography in the School of Geography and Sustainable Development at the University of St Andrews. She is a feminist political geographer with varied research interests including postcolonialism, global health, and critical geopolitics. Her work has sought to extend what is considered to be the geopolitical beyond the formal spheres of statecraft to include popular culture and the everyday, and more recently in postcolonial work on subaltern geopolitics, materiality, and the meanings of global health.

ORCID

Jo Sharp http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5805-4296

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