



Unimagined Communities in a Time of Global Crisis

By Weisong Gao

On February 14th, I landed in Guangzhou. It was pouring outside, contrasting the ghostly quiet airport with only a handful of travelers. Waiting for my connecting flight, I video chatted with my husband back in the States. Neither of us brought up that it was actually Valentine's Day; it just felt ill-timed. Irony.

We knew we had to be apart due to the change to my immigration status, but what timing it was that I must fly back to my home country of China during its COVID-19 outbreak and lockdowns. We had plans where he would come back to China a couple of times to visit me and family, which became impossible as the global pandemic worsened. My husband was gravely concerned with my well-being in China. He bought masks and sanitizers for me, constantly reminding me to wash hands and stay inside. However, tables are turned within weeks; now it's me who is free to be out and about, but my husband is required to stay at home and left with no facial coverings. Irony.

The pandemic has made our separation not just a matter of physical distance, but also a feeling of stretched temporality. Time has slowed down. We don't know when life can

go back to before, when people can travel, or when we can meet again. As a queer of a color immigrant myself, I cannot help thinking how much of a difference would it make to immigration had the United States effectively controlled the virus and prevented the horrendous outbreak. Would it mean immigration any differently? As the virus is devouring the globe and many countries have closed its doors to non-citizens, it's safe to assume that the United States would nevertheless do the same. As is said to be effective in alleviating the severity of the pandemic, implementing strict travel bans on immigrants while allowing citizens into the country proves to be only a political decision that does not have any epidemiological grounds. Irony.

Put all ironies aside, I'd like to draw on Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence" to reflect on the immigrant life experience in the contemporary era, especially in a time of crisis like this. In his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Nixon formulates the idea of slow violence to trace how certain groups of people are erased from the discourse of national development and memories. Nixon has coined terms such as "surplus people," "developmental refugee," and "virtual inhabitants" to refer to "unimagined communities internal to the space of the nation-state, communities whose vigorously unimagined condition becomes indispensable to maintaining a highly selective discourse of national development" (150). These communities, according to Nixon, "under the banner of development, are physically unsettled and imaginatively removed, evacuated from place and time and thus uncoupled from the idea of both a national future and a national memory" (151).

Nixon's formulation of slow violence is helpful here, as it leads me to think whether we are living in a world that is truly ready to consider immigration as integral to both a nation's and the global future. Given the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic has been handled worldwide, I also begin to question how strongly the beloved economic and cultural globalization has enhanced, if at all, the experience of immigration that it inevitably accelerates. In fact, I tend to believe that global crises like the COVID-19 pandemic reveal how immigrant communities are ultimately excluded from the imagination of the global future that traces its root in the deep-seated, virulent nationalism, as Gonzalo Navajas reminds us that "the nation means reassurance and self-affirmation, but often at the expense of the other, the dismissal of difference, the overestimation of one's restricted set of values and the devaluation of those of others" (21).

In light of this, I argue that this pandemic is an opportunity for us to reconsider theories of diaspora, globalization, and transnationalism to better understand the life experience of immigrants in the time of global crisis. The traditional field of diaspora studies seeks to untangle the intricate relationship between subjectivity and belonging. For example, studying the diaspora often means unpacking common themes of uprooting, displacement, and longing for "home," as well as theorizing how diasporic subjects create new forms of collective attachment to the particular space of the diaspora. However, traditional diasporic studies have left us with fewer tools to understand those

subjects who embark on their diasporic life precisely because of their disidentification with the nation or are stuck in-between national belongings as they separate with loved ones. Instead, I'd like to propose thinking about diaspora and immigration in ways that transcend the spatial attachment to the nation. In doing so, we need a more elastic framework that can adequately illuminate the possibility of, to use Navajas's words, "post-national" or "a-national" lifeworlds that generate different modes of understanding selfhood in contemporary history. Ultimately, with revised theories and frameworks of diaspora and transnationalism, we need to be able to imagine a future where the life experience of immigration is untethered from the ineluctable sentiments of loneliness, anxiety, and trauma.



Works Cited

Navajas, Gonzalo. "Transnational Aesthetics: Literature and Film Between Borders."
(2005).

Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press, 2011.