

Stay home to stay safe? South Durban's fence line communities in pandemic times

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In the so-called fence line communities adjacent to the notorious Engen refinery on Tara Road in Wentworth (South Durban), diverse aerosols jointly flooded the air – among those, benzene and sulfur dioxides are known to be carcinogenic and respiratory irritants. The Engen refinery was South Africa's oldest crude oil refinery and was commissioned in 1954, producing 135 000 barrels per day until last. Since the incident this post will focus on, the refinery has been closed and, according to current plans, will not be put back into operation. Instead, it will be repurposed as a storage site. Similar to 'frontline' health workers during the pandemic, the fence line communities are those most exposed to threatening particles; only that they were not equipped with any protective measures. For decades the daily lives of residents had been marked by the omnipresence of poisoning. Due to the significantly high morbidity, the area has also been called the „Cancer Alley“ (Vidal 2014). Because residents were constantly exposed to the silent toxins in the air they breathed, their bodies fought the constant infiltration of pollutants, resulting in lowered immune defenses and severe courses of Covid-19. Here, the pandemic diversified the configuration of aerosols and added another layer of

gravity to the local situation. The range of fine particles in the air comes with different features and triggers quite contradictory instructions about „safety“, a crucial concept in pandemic times.

In this blog post, I discuss how the pandemic and an explosion accelerated the slow violence in a polluted community. Furthermore, the interplay of these incidents reveals that discourses on safety in the pandemic and corresponding instructions are tailored to a middle class and fail to meet the needs of a community at the refinery's edge. Since I have not yet had the opportunity to travel to South Africa myself due to the pandemic, my empirical material so far has been based on digital ethnography: social media data, online interviews, and email correspondences.

Corona conditions urged us to draw attention to aerosols everywhere, since they are obviously the primary distribution channels of SARS-CoV-2. Prevention measures to keep us from breathing in those threatening micro-vehicles have drastically re-ordered our social lives and sensory experiences. The distribution of aerosols is crucial to the texture of daily practices and, after all, shapes ways of being and sensing. South Africa underwent one of the hardest lockdowns worldwide as of 27 March 2020. Since then, the alert level of the country has continuously moved up and down (South African Government 2021), ranging from significant contact restrictions and movement limitations (level 4) to basic rules such as wearing a mask and keeping a distance (level 1).

Complicated by massive police violence and food shortages, local experiences of this period have differed drastically (cf. Levine/ Manderson 2020). In July 2021, protests against the jailing of the former president Jacob Zuma ignited a wave of violence in Johannesburg and Durban: riots and looting, and finally, a horrific massacre, in which Indian-origin vigilantes killed more than thirty Black residents in Phoenix, a town about 25 kilometres northwest of Durban. The corona pandemic must be read in the plural, depending on its myriad entanglements and multiple „relations to“. We are dealing with an embedded COVID-19 that takes on very different forms and meanings in, essentially, more-than-pandemic lifeworlds, depending on the material, social and personal environments that virus-containing aerosols advance into.

Public representations of corona, however, are most commonly related to middle-class aesthetics. This is evident in the online series „The Covid-19 diaries“ that the South African department of health publishes on a website they created exclusively for information about COVID-19. In a mixed format of written texts and short video clips, affected South Africans, from health workers to convalescents, have shared their experiences, challenges and coping strategies with a wider public. At the very beginning of the video posts, the familiar slogan „Stay home, stay safe“ is displayed – again, a phrase that is mainly addressing the middle class. South African homes cannot simply be equated with safety, with or without COVID-19. Staying at home in polluted communities means staying exposed to the fumes that continuously intrude on flats through any possible gaps. This is aggravated by the fact that families oftentimes live in overcrowded places with poor sanitary conditions.

One of the authors in the online series writes:

„27 March 2020 will be etched in our collective memories as the first day of our national Covid-19 lockdown. For many of us, that day was like the first day of an unplanned holiday. In good faith, we

welcomed the idea of the lockdown. We felt that while the government and the health department requested a 21-day lockdown to prepare the health services for the pandemic, we would use the time constructively.“ (Jacobs 2020)

From this perspective, the stagnation of social life takes shape as a pause from the ordinary and, thus, as an opportunity to reflect on one’s habits and goals. For some, the pandemic turned out as a chance to refashion one’s life. The series also talks about how to endure isolation well: by using one’s own room and separate bathroom, staying connected via videochats and taking moderate online yoga courses to help recover in the weeks after infection (Department of Health 2020). These testimonies reflect quite a particular perspective: the angle of the privileged. Their comforts are taken for granted in the public debate, even though these are obviously not accessible for millions of South Africans residing in disastrous conditions. Corona experiences in these lifeworlds tend to be rendered invisible, even though they are much more common than those shown publicly. The country’s level of inequality is extreme (Oppermann 2021); both socioeconomic and environmental disparities are drawn along the lines of racially segregated spatiality that the apartheid era left behind (Beinart 2010: 1).



Image 1: Protest against pollution from the Engen refinery in South Durban. Source: SDCEA

The communities in Wentworth and Merebank in South Durban are used to harmful aerosols and have experienced exposure to chemical fumes across generations. The area has a long history of dispossession and forced displacement. That is, Merebank is mainly inhabited by descendants of Indian indentured labourers who were brought to the area to work on sugar cane plantations in the

second half of the 19th century. Meanwhile, Wentworth was built as a Coloured township to forcibly relocate people according to apartheid legacies in the 1960s; the term „Coloured“ refers to the definition of a multiracial ethnic group used for classification during apartheid. Since the end of apartheid and in response to the rededication of the site in favor of heavy industry, environmental and labour activism has been flourishing in Wentworth (Chari 2008: 63). Situated in the shadow of the refinery, both townships share the manifest toxicity and concern about the equally ubiquitous potential for disaster on their doorstep. The slow violence (Nixon 2011) is occasionally accelerating when incidents cause a sudden and huge emission of severe toxics, and sadly, the Engen refinery has a long history of incidents. The most recent explosion happened during the pandemic, in the early morning of December 4, 2020 (Pillay 2020).

This time, residents had been advised to isolate themselves and, thus, to stay in their homes next to the refinery. I have been talking with Bongani, who is working for the “South Durban Community Environmental Alliance”, a local NGO which is actively committed to environmental justice (SDCEA, <https://sdcea.co.za/>). He summarised the entanglements of corona, pollution and explosion as follows:

„Imagine how it’s like, for example, people had nowhere to go because of this restriction. And these chemicals are, you know, intruding, just coming in through ventilation, through windows, through whatever routes they can actually come into your property. And unfortunately, you cannot take your family and maybe go off the area because most of these families, I mean especially fence line communities when they are experiencing the gas out from Engen, the option is to maybe just go out of the area for three, four hours you know. Some of them don’t have vehicles, [so] they need to take public transport. They are putting themselves even in more danger [when] trying to run away from the toxic smells.“ (Bongani, Zoom, 10 Jun 21)

At that time in early December, a fairly high number of people were at home when the explosion happened, partly due to the high unemployment rate that had increased significantly since the beginning of the pandemic. Most people used to work in local companies or stores that had to close down temporarily or permanently due to the economic consequences of the pandemic. The residents were scared by the massive tremor and started to panic, as Bongani told me. Heavy fume and toxic smells permeated the homes, settled down in clothes and textiles; windows and walls cracked, and black ashes accumulated in the interior. The effects of the explosion pushed themselves indoors as much as into the environment and there was basically no way to escape. Moreover, it was not quite clear how serious the incident would actually become:

„You wouldn’t know what’s next. You know, one boom probably can trigger another five or ten explosions, especially in an explosive refinery. It’s not like a factory that doesn’t deal with any explosive stuff, you know, [and] one boom can be just one boom, but in a petrochemical refinery, one explosion can lead to many other explosions because there are tanks on site. They are containing this explosive liquid stuff.“ (Bongani, Zoom, 10 Jun 21)

The residents of a particular apartment building, block 10, however, experienced the most severe impact – during the blast, a spark dropped on the roof of the building and caused a fire. An 11-year-old girl suffered serious burns on her body, and all the 28 residents lost their homes and belongings

in the middle of the global pandemic. They were extemporarily resettled to buildings equipped with the most necessary and moved back more than half a year later after refurbishment (Nzama 2021).

Here, slow violence accelerated tremendously due to a confluence of factors. Both the pandemic and the explosion have heightened local health pressures enormously. The explosion and the pandemic condensed into a powerful catalyst of the locally experienced slow violence and revealed more sharply the contours of a profoundly unequal society. Social, environmental and health inequalities become even more intolerable and unbearable under pandemic conditions. Still, public guidelines are tailored to only a small segment of the population – to those who can afford protection and visibility anyway, whether with or without Corona.

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