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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Transnational life and cross-border immobility in pandemic times

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically disrupted and reconfigured the cross-border movements of people. Based on an anthropological study of the experiences of transnational migrants during the pandemic (May 2020–May 2021), this article explores stories of how cross-border immobility impacts transnational life and sense of belonging. The stories reveal the emotional toll of prolonged family separation across geographical distances when loved ones are no longer 'just one flight away' and give voice to experiences of being 'trapped', 'stuck' or 'stranded' in a state of transnational limbo. Running through the stories are intensified experiences of foreignness, non-belonging, precariousness and discrimination. Some also felt abandoned by their country of origin as border closures left them 'locked out' and 'blowing in the wind', fostering an experience akin to exile.

KEYWORDS
belonging, COVID-19, cross-border (im)mobility, migrant transnationalism, pandemic mobility regimes, transnational life, transnationalized families

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic transformed our globalized world almost overnight as borders were closed and international travel severely restricted, disrupting and reconfiguring transnational lives and mobilities (Martin & Bergmann, 2021; Nehring & Hu, 2021). As the virus spread across the globe in early 2020, most nation-states responded by closing their borders (Benton et al., 2021). Beyond the early stages of the pandemic, border restrictions and entry bans evolved in differing ways across nation-states throughout 2020 and 2021, some becoming increasingly bewildering

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and disproportionate. In many cases, this involved both an intensification and reconfiguration of existing mobility inequalities (Adey et al., 2021; Benton et al., 2021; Heller, 2021). Pre-pandemic mobility regimes based on citizenship and visa restrictions (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013) were conflated with shifting 'sanitary apartheids' based on designated Covid-19 risk (Heller, 2021, p. 113) along with selective allowances for 'essential' travel often defined mainly from a socio-economic perspective (Salazar, 2021).

The human impact of this dramatic intensification and reconfiguration of bordering practices, unequal mobility regimes and biopolitical nationalism (Heller, 2021; Nehring & Hu, 2021), was highly significant for a variety of transnationally mobile groups whose lives span territorial borders, such as migrants, transnationalized families, long-distance couples, international students and so on. Those affected by border restrictions and entry bans were left in a prolonged state of limbo, separated from loved ones and facing a range of threats to their transnational lives and well-being (Nehring & Hu, 2021). This is what I focus on in the present article.

Based on a study conducted between May 2020 and May 2021, I explore stories of the transnational lives of migrants across a range of different nation-states who were affected by international travel, border- and entry-restrictions during the pandemic. The aim is to give voice to experiences of cross-border immobility and contribute to address urgent calls for research on 'the severe consequences of the pandemic for those whose lives are forged and sustained in a transnational social space' (Nehring & Hu, 2021, p. 2).

The concept of transnational life is defined as 'living simultaneously within and beyond the boundaries of a nation-state' (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004, p. 1006). The key premise is that social life takes place across multiple nation-states, encompassing both those who migrate, family members who stay behind and other enduring transnational ties (Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007). This means negotiating life worlds that involve combinations of distance and periodic 'shuttling across international borders' (Conradson & Latham, 2005, p. 228). Transnationals are dependent on physical, corporeal international travel for seeing family and friends and fulfilling social obligations (Elliot and Urry, 2010; Larsen et al., 2007). Such intermittent physical co-presence is 'crucial to patterns of social life that occur at-a-distance' as Urry (2003, p. 156) argues.

The stories represented in this article show how transnational ways of being and belonging shifted in the face of a global crisis that involved loss of access to physical cross-border travel experienced as *existential* (Salazar, 2021). In the following, I first discuss existing scholarship on migrant transnationalism and cross-border mobility to set the stage for understanding the threats to transnational lives that pandemic immobility and exclusionary bordering practices represent. I then describe the virtual fieldwork study the article is based on, before turning to some of the stories my research participants shared with me.

MIGRANT TRANSNATIONALISM AND CROSS-BORDER (IM)MOBILITY

The transnational lives of migrants span geographical- and nation-state boundaries and involve, sometimes extensive, movements back and forth across borders as existing scholarship has shown (Larsen et al., 2007; Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007). Transnational migrants live their lives across borders embedded in multiple geographically dispersed family and other social networks in a variety of ways and at shifting levels of intensity (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004, p. 1003, 1009) distinguish between 'ways of being' and 'ways of belonging' in a transnational social field. Transnational ways of being refer to the social relations and practices of living a life across borders. Transnational ways of belonging refer to enactments of identification with and attachment to multiple countries, diasporas or other transnational communities (cf. Colic-Peisker, 2010; Kennedy, 2004; Skovgaard-Smith & Poulfelt, 2018). Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) argue that transnational ways of being and belonging combine in a range of shifting and complex ways depending on different life phases, circumstances and events. 'Home' is similarly understood as a space that is constructed in shifting ways over time and can be manifested in one territorial location or in several (Nowicka, 2007). A sense of 'home' can, thus, extend beyond single localities and involve 'globally stretching' networks 'that are always potentially close' (Nowicka, 2007, p. 83).

Middling transnationalism

The term 'middling transnationalism', coined by Conradson and Latham (2005), refers to the transnational lives forged by a broad range of migrants who are neither disadvantaged nor wealthy elites and make up a considerable share of migrants worldwide (Ho, 2011; Ryan et al., 2015; Voigt-Graf, 2005). It is this 'middling' social and economic spectrum of migrant transnationalism that I focus on in this article. 'Middling' transnational migrants tend to occupy a middle-class status in country of origin and/or country of residence (Smith, 2005) and are often well-educated (Conradson & Latham, 2005; Guarnizo et al., 2003; Van Bochove et al., 2010). Some qualify for various work permit schemes that designate specific categories of migrants as 'skilled' or 'highly skilled' such as in the case of IT migrants (Millar & Salt, 2007). However, self-initiated middle-class migration is much broader (Ho, 2011) and can involve multiple migrations across the life course for education, employment, love and other personal reasons (Findlay et al., 2015).

What 'middling' transnationals share is sufficient social and economic capital, accumulated over time, to enable them to forge and sustain a transnational life (Guarnizo et al., 2003; Ho, 2011), although rarely as 'highflying' expatriates or transnational managerial elites on intra-company transfers (Beaverstock, 2005; Millar & Salt, 2008). 'Middling' transnationals often face a similar general intensification of precarity and rise of inequality as non-migrant middle-classes, which has been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Glick Schiller, 2021). Some 'middling' transnational migrants may acquire citizenship, escaping the insecurities of immigration regimes and enabling them to build a more stable and secure life (Guarnizo et al., 2003; Van Bochove et al., 2010). For many, however, there are no simple paths to citizenship and work visas are often tied to jobs for temporary periods, which means continuously applying for visas (Ho, 2011). This may, in turn, necessitate relocation elsewhere or return migration to country of origin.

Cross-border mobility

Cross-border mobility, both virtual and physical, is at the heart of transnational 'ways of being'. Depending on life stage, transnational practices of maintaining family and other personal relationships across geographical distances and borders are socially, culturally and emotionally important for most transnationals, and require substantial efforts and resources (Conradson & Latham, 2005). From the 1990s onwards, cheap international phone calls allowed transnational families across the globe to connect, serving as 'a kind of social glue' (Vertovec, 2004, p. 220). Online video calls and instant messaging followed with apps such as Skype, Whatsapp, Messenger, FaceTime and so on. As the speed and affordability of internet connectivity increased and digital communication became more widely available, some transnational families embraced these technologies to simulate everyday family interactions across geographical distances. Online video calls, in particular, changed the experience of transnational family life further, allowing instant audial and visual synchronicity (King-O'Riain, 2015).

Digital communication technologies, thus, provide increasingly accessible ways of keeping in daily, virtual contact with family members across vast distances (Elliott & Urry, 2010). There are, however, also clear limits to virtual closeness in transnational families (Bacigalupe & Camara, 2012) and the experience of distance and separation remains salient to varying degrees (Ryan et al, 2015). Constraints on virtual communication play a role, such as the online availability, time and engagement of non-migrant family and friends in other places (Ryan et al., 2015). Furthermore, virtual communication produces a different kind of co-presence to physical, embodied co-presence, one that can create a certain sense of proximity, while concurrently intensifying the experience of distance and absence and thereby the need for physical co-presence (Urry, 2002, 2003). As Vertovic (2004, p. 223) similarly argues in the context of international phone calls, 'a kind of punctuated sociality' is produced that simultaneously both alleviates and heightens the emotional strain of long-distance separation. Intermittent periods of being bodily in the same space, in the physical proximity of others—face-to-face and together facing a place and a moment—is a fundamental necessity for social

connection and relationships at a distance (Urry, 2002, 2003). The 'meetingness' of being present with others, 'face-to-face, emotion-to emotion, body-to-body', is 'the stuff of social life', and virtual communications 'do not *substitute* for physical travel' as Elliot and Urry (2010, p. 157, 158, 142, original emphasis) argue.

Thus, as digital connectivity between people in geographically dispersed locations expanded, so did the simultaneous 'globalization of intermittent co-presence' that involves extensive international air travel (Urry, 2002, p. 264). International business travel grew exponentially in the context of a globalizing world, in part, due to the compulsion for face-to-face 'meetingness' to maintain transnational social networks (Beaverstock et al., 2009; Urry, 2003). Enhanced access to low-cost international air travel also allowed a broader range of transnational migrants and their families to visit each other, constituting another fast-growing form of international travel (Larsen et al., 2007). Visits to be together, fulfil social obligations and take part in weddings and other family rituals are important aspects of migrant transnationalism (cf. O'Flaherty et al., 2007; Olwig, 2002). In some cases, these obligations involve parenting of young children at a distance (Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007; Parreñas, 2005). Transnational grandparenting, where parents of migrants travel regularly to visit their adult migrant children and grandchildren to take part in their everyday lives, is increasingly significant (Nedelcu & Wyss, 2020). Thus, the need for international travel to enable intermittent physical co-presence with family and friends, to fulfil social obligations and maintain family life at a distance is highly pertinent in transnational lives (Larsen et al., 2007; Ryan et al, 2015).

Embodied co-presence with significant others across territorial borders and geographical distances is, however, inherently limited to varying degrees (Ryan et al., 2015). Physical international travel is not necessarily always possible for a range of reasons, such as work commitments, competing family obligations, the time and cost of long-distance journeys, residency requirements and so on (Ryan et al., 2015). There are also barriers to receiving visits from transnational family, depending on their nationality such as difficulties with obtaining visas in the context of increasingly restrictive mobility regimes (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013).

Pandemic immobility

With the pandemic came a dramatic and unprecedented surge of international travel restrictions, entry bans and border closures worldwide (Benton et al., 2021). Tracking by the International Organization of Migration (IOM) shows that the number of governments who had issued COVID-19 travel restrictions increased from 90 by 17th March 2020 to 221 by 21st May 2020 and 18 months later by 13th September 2021, 229 territories had in place entry restrictions at international airports and/or land borders (IOM, 2021). Initially, most governments banned all or most international arrivals, but over time a mixed picture emerged as new pandemic mobility regimes evolved with COVID-19 testing, costly hotel quarantine, entry bans on specific nationalities or regions, risk ranking systems, route restrictions and eventually vaccination requirements (Benton et al., 2021). Some countries imposed ever more restrictive entry and visa policies that labelled a broad range of territories as a high COVID-19 risk, while simultaneously enabling inward and outward tourism to and from countries designated as safe (Heller, 2021) and issuing exemptions for 'essential' travel for business, professional sport and so on.

The scale and scope of pandemic travel and border restrictions represent the most severe in history with far-reaching consequences for all types of migrants (Benton et al., 2021). Some of the most vulnerable were left stranded without immigration status, without sufficient resources and without access to consular assistance, as documented by the IOM in mid-2020 (Benton et al., 2021). During the SARS outbreak in the early 2000s, marginalized populations were similarly disproportionately affected in places where border restrictions were imposed (Martin & Bergmann, 2021).

Emerging evidence related to COVID-19, as well as previous pandemics, suggests that international travel bans and restrictions were mainly effective in the initial stages to buy time and when poorly conceived, disproportionate and prolonged do more harm than good (Martin & Bergmann, 2021). Already restrictive bordering practices and 'the uneven and differential capabilities for mobility that have always been there' (Adey et al., 2021) were further

acerbated and reconfigured (Heller, 2021; Martin and Bergman, 2021). This implied significant threats to transnational life and wellbeing, ranging from prolonged family separation to inability to return or move elsewhere in the case of job and visa losses. The impact was further exacerbated by the unpredictability, complexity and inequitable leanings of different national bordering practices (Heller, 2021) and the symbolic exclusion they propagated as the stories represented in this article illuminate.

VIRTUAL FIELDWORK

The article is based on a study carried out virtually from May 2020 to May 2021. Using an anthropological and transnational perspective, I shaped over time a virtual ethnographic study centred on 'participant listening' (Forsey, 2010), namely listening to the stories of transnational lives being negotiated in pandemic times. As always when conducting fieldwork, I talked to people and asked them to share their stories and experiences. However, in the middle of a pandemic, there were no physical field sites to enter or places to go to, only fragmented virtual spaces. Thus, I took inspiration from emerging concepts of digital/virtual ethnography (Caliandro, 2018) for the study of transnational migration (Piacenti et al., 2014). Such virtual fieldwork implied the disadvantage of lack of physical co-presence (Urry, 2002, 2003), that is, being unable to engage in face-to-face conversation, observe social situations and interact with participants. Nevertheless, virtual methods for the multi-sited study of migrant transnationalism, also beyond the pandemic, has the potential to help transcend some of the classic constraints of space and time in transnational research, as Piacenti et al. (2014) argue.

In concrete terms, the fieldwork involved ethnographic interviews via video call and an online qualitative interview survey (Jansen, 2010) consisting of open questions designed with an 'ethnographic imaginary' (Forsey, 2010, p. 567). I also used social media for more informal virtual networking and observation. Formal data collection was carried out in two primary phases, the first from May 2020 and the second from March 2021. The research process was sequential and exploratory, meaning that salient themes emerging during the first phase in 2020, particularly related to transnational life and travel restrictions, were then explored further in the second phase in 2021 involving a broader sample. As a starting point, I relied initially on contacts from previous ethnographic fieldwork amongst a diverse community of transnational professionals in Amsterdam (Skovgaard-Smith & Poulfelt, 2018) and further used 'snowballing' which both relies on and provides insights into social networks (Noy, 2008). As the fieldwork evolved, the link to the Netherlands continuously reappeared in unpredictable ways, while the networks also took me virtually far beyond it.

I conducted 36 ethnographic interviews via video call using Zoom, MS Teams, WebEx, Whatsapp or Skype depending on the preferences of interviewees. During the first phase of the study from May 2020 onwards, I conducted 23 interviews and in the second phase from March 2021 onwards, 13 interviews. In the second phase, I furthermore expanded the reach of the study, to enable me to formally 'listen' to a wider range of experiences. As pandemic-related restrictions on cross-border travel continued and evolved, I was observing and *feeling* that the lived experience and impact of this loss of mobility changed and intensified. These observations were informal as part of continuous virtual fieldwork on social media, for example, Facebook groups, Twitter, etc. I did not collect stories or experiences people shared on social media. Instead, to enable people to make an informed decision about sharing their experiences and formally consent to take part in the research, I used an online platform (Qualtrics) to seek contributions in written form, devising a qualitative interview survey featuring 12 open questions and demographic background questions.

The 36 participants interviewed come from 26 different countries, for example, Australia, Austria, Argentina, Azerbaijan, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, Ecuador, France, Germany, India, Ireland, Mexico, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Puerto Rico, Romania, Serbia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, UK and the US. They live in a range of different places, for example, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Ireland, Netherlands, Norway Singapore, South Africa, Switzerland, Turkey, UAE, UK and the US, a majority working in international organizations. Sixteen have multiple nationality (dual or triple) and four also have another cultural/ethnic background (Indonesian, Goan, South Korean and Zimbabwean). A majority are multilingual and have lived outside their country of birth for most

of their working lives (10–20 years or more). Twenty-three are women and 13 are men. The qualitative survey data include 102 responses from participants representing 29 different countries-of-origin and 23 different countries-of-residence. Seventy-four are women and 28 are men. Eighty-five have a college or higher education degree, 49 at master's level and 6 at the doctoral level. Both interview transcripts and written responses from the qualitative survey were organized and explored in NVivo based on what the participants talked about, but the data were not coded as such, to avoid fragmenting or decontextualizing their stories (Pierre & Jackson, 2014). All the participants are anonymous, and names used in the following section are pseudonyms.

STORIES OF TRANSNATIONAL LIFE IN PANDEMIC TIMES

Across the stories, there was a pattern of experiencing video calls and other virtual communication as useful in specific domains such as work during the pandemic. Participants whose work transcends national boundaries, and thus, would normally involve travel, mostly experienced virtual interaction in this context positively, although they also talked about the challenges associated with lack of intermittent physical co-presence for transnational relationship building with clients and so on (Beaverstock et al., 2009; Urry, 2003). As one interviewee described it, 'there is something with a human connection that you cannot replace by a Zoom call; being in the same room, there is something about the look, the energy between people—you need a room' (Jack, British living in Austria, interview 22 May 2020). However, the impact of the loss of access to intermittent co-presence was most acute in the domain of transnational personal and family life. This is what I focus on exploring here through some of the stories the participants shared with me.

Zooming across borders and families no longer 'just one flight away'

Mariana is Portuguese and at the time of the interview (20 May 2020), she had lived in London for 8 years. She had recently acquired British citizenship because of Brexit as she explained, 'just in case, I'm just gonna keep this here'. Mariana has previously lived in the Netherlands and her parents are from Goa where they now live. In the first part of the interview, Mariana focused mainly on the silver linings of everyone being on Zoom, for instance, in the domain of global work. As part of her role, Mariana works with teams across India, Kenya and the US, and 'now because everything has moved online, I feel like everything is a lot more visible and that I actually feel more connected to the people [in the other locations], because they're all available'. Mariana also experienced something similar outside of work with her friends in Portugal. 'Usually [before the pandemic] they would hang out at someone's house on a weekend, and now they can't, so they do it on Zoom, and then I can join as well, so it's great'.

This experience of virtual interaction during the early pandemic lockdown period highlights that the potential for transnational connectedness through virtual means is dependent on the extent to which contacts in other locations are also simultaneously restricted to virtual co-presence. As Mariana described it, 'I feel a lot more connected to them [friends in Portugal] now than I did before, the past 5 years, because we all kind of have the same limitations now, of not being able to be together'. This shared and simultaneous experience of immobility amongst both migrants and non-migrants is unique to the pandemic lockdown context early on in 2020, and it highlights some of the constraints on virtual connection in normal times where non-migrant family and friends are not necessarily accessible online (Ryan et al., 2015).

Thus, under certain conditions, virtual interaction can enable a sense of proximity and co-presence with friends and family across borders and geographical distances. However, Mariana went on to also talk about a heightened sense of distance: 'I feel more… it definitely has made me miss… miss things, especially having this opportunity to connect with my friends from Portugal more. It has also made me kind of miss them as well and miss my life there'. Thus, as Urry (2002) argues, virtual interaction intensifies the experience of embodied absence and physical distance.

Mariana continued by talking about what was impacting her and her husband the most. Searching for the words she said:

> Having families away… it's just, it's… yeah…not being able to, you know…we've always lived away, but it's usually… it's just one flight away, but now it's like… it's not… so that's kind of… it's had quite a profound impact I think on… on us. In terms of thinking, in the future, do we want to actually be so far away from our families?

Mariana's parents had been back in Goa for the past year at this time, her dad is seriously ill and she was planning to visit in April, but this got cancelled.

> So now I don't know when I'm going to be able to see them, because all the borders are closed, and the Indian borders are closed, and I wouldn't even be allowed in the country. So that's been a very negative aspect of it… not knowing when I'm going to be able to see family face-to-face again.

The uncertainty of not knowing when physical travel will become possible again is intensified by her father being ill. However, Mariana is also being confronted with closed borders in the country where her parents are from and now live, but where she herself does not have citizenship and, therefore, cannot enter. As a child of migrants, who have returned to their country of origin, and herself a migrant to a third country together with her husband who is Portuguese, closed borders bring up new and difficult questions. Questions about how to 'be' transnationally with families across multiple territories when you can no longer take for granted the 'air bridges' that connected them.

'Locked out' and 'trapped' by closed borders

Suzanna is from Australia, also has New Zealand and British citizenship and has lived 17 years in the Netherlands (interview 25 May, 2020). She similarly talked about border closures as the most difficult aspect, in this case, in Australia where she grew up and her family live. 'In terms of the borders being closed, it is… I would say painful. Knowing that I can't get home even if I wanted to. It feels like family is a very, very long way away. That hurts, not really knowing when you can get home'.

For transnationals living in Australia, the closed borders were equally difficult, not least in the context of important family events such as the birth of a baby, since it was not possible to travel and family could not visit. George (British/Zimbabwean) who lives in Australia (interview 18 June 2020), and whose partner had a baby during the early stages of the pandemic, describes his experience like this:

> The grandparents and extended families, both of our families in the UK, they can't come and see us. So we've done in many video calls. It is quite sad really that they can't touch him [his baby son]. They had already booked their flights. And yeah, so we do feel a little bit like we are so isolated. […] When he was born, these flights were already cancelled. I remember my mum saying that she wishes she held him when he was quite small.

The impact of closed borders for this transnational family is clear—'we are so isolated'. There is no way to bridge the distance to enable his family to touch and hold his baby son. This is the pain of absence and geographical distance that all the video calls in the world cannot lessen.

Over time as the pandemic progressed, the initial loss of cross-border mobility became prolonged, for some throughout 2020 and 2021. For those still facing more of less closed borders, it became increasingly difficult, such as

for Australian and New Zealand citizens who faced severe barriers to enter their own country. As one survey respondent described it, 'for Australians, you are essentially locked out' and this has 'increased my longing to return to Australia'. Another respondent from New Zealand wrote: 'I feel more insecure because I know it's more difficult to get back to my country, and more isolated because the sentiment in my home country is very anti-returner'. Being 'locked out' prompted feelings of homesickness, isolation, insecurity, non-belonging and abandonment as the following quotes from survey respondents further illustrate.

> Homesickness has hit hard. I try to bury my feelings, but I feel frustrated, tired and alone […] I love to travel usually so feel trapped here. I feel stuck in a country that isn't really mine. I feel that I won't ever belong here. The notion of not seeing your family for several years weighs heavy. It means that the previously held idea of living a good life overseas with frequent trips home isn't sustainable (Australian living in the Netherlands).

> Feel like a prisoner. Just isolated. Very depressing to be in Sweden at this time. Hard to see the light at the end of the tunnel… feel forgotten and neglected by the Australian government. […] My own government in Australia doesn't seem to give a toss about Australians overseas. How can a country legally make it so hard and expensive for its citizens to return home during a global crisis? (Australian living in Sweden).

This sense of being ostracized by your home country was further acerbated for those who faced a personal crisis such as job loss and visas expiring. This is how one survey respondent from Australia, who lives in the Netherlands, experienced this:

> The Australian government put passenger caps on returning passengers without offering assistance to people who had to travel. I lost my job last year—it felt very scary not knowing if I would be able to leave the country in time if I couldn't find a new job. I felt abandoned by my home country—the rhetoric of the government painted expats as 'undeserving others'. It was dehumanizing.

At the same time, she also felt more unhappy being in the Netherlands and not just because of the job loss. 'I'm a non-white Australian with some Chinese heritage' and 'there has been increased racism towards me' and 'locals, who flout the rules, mock me for trying to keep them safe from the virus.' Another survey respondent from Australia living in Singapore, also described such a double impact of not feeling welcome in either home or host country:

> We are no longer welcome in Singapore, but can't go home to Australia either. What would happen if our jobs end? Singapore has gone hostile towards expats. Many new rules are designed to make life harder and encourage us to leave. Australia is obviously on longer home, as a citizen I can't go home.

Another survey respondent from Hungary living in Singapore wrote that the most difficult aspect was 'not being able to leave' combined with the increased 'hatred from locals', 'xenophobia is strong'. Singapore introduced restrictions on non-citizens re-entering, meaning that even those who could enter their country of origin could not travel to visit family elsewhere if they wanted to return to keep their jobs and stay in Singapore. As Bart from the Netherlands described it, 'I do feel a little bit trapped in Singapore, because it is a small island, the borders are closed' (interview 6 November 2020).

'We are just leaves blowing in the wind'

While a heightened sense of precariousness was evident amongst many of those who shared the experience of being 'locked out' of their country of origin, one story stood out. Helen, who is from New Zealand, shared her family's story in the survey. After 30 years living abroad, in Australia, Hong Kong, UK, China, Vietnam, America, France, Germany and lastly Singapore, the experience of being 'kicked out' during the pandemic trumped everything. 'My husband's work permit was cancelled, and we were given 30 days to leave the country'. He lost his job in Singapore, a highly skilled role, when 'the entire AsiaPac team was wound up'. At the same time, 'locals were becoming meaner in the streets, bumping into you on purpose, cutting in lines, hushing you on public transportation. I'll never go there again', Helen says. With very little time to wind up their life and facing financial disaster, 'we had to figure out what country we could enter as our family have multiple nationalities'. They were unable to enter Helen's country of citizenship, New Zealand, 'due to lack of spaces in quarantine'. 'Learning that your country of nationality doesn't have to accept citizens in a timely manner has been heart breaking'. They managed to get into the UK to stay temporarily with her husband's parents.

> The impact has been immense upon us as a couple, as a family and to my in-laws where we are now staying. My family is angry at us for not joining them, yet know we are locked out of the country. Yet they are supportive of the [New Zealand] government's decisions as it 'keeps them safe'.

'I feel stateless', she says, describing how they have 'no idea where to send the kids to school 'as we may have to leave in a few months'. The kids 'need stability for the next few years and I don't know where to find it. We are just leaves blowing in the wind at the moment'.

'I have my body here in Norway, but my soul is down there [in Serbia]'

The next story takes us to Norway where border restrictions were further tightened in early 2021 with entry bans and requirements such as hotel quarantine. Adrijana is from Serbia and moved to Norway with her husband and children 7 years ago. As 'an expert in her field' she could not get an 'adequate job' in Serbia, 'because I'm not politically active', 'you have to know people', 'so corruption'. They decided to move to a 'country that can do something with me'. From the start of our conversation (27 April 2021), it is clear how strongly Adrijana wants to share her story. 'I have no questions' she says, 'just big one, thank you, thank you for doing this'. Nobody is listening she explains, governments 'just forget about us'. For Adrijana and her family, life in Norway was also not easy before the pandemic. It took a long time for her husband to get a job and socially it was difficult to get to know Norwegians. 'I personally don't have a problem, but you see that people have friends and I'm not coming in any of those interactions'. But it was ok she says, 'I'm here just to do my job and for living, for social contact, I have to go to Serbia'. Her children spent school holidays with their grandparents there, and 'we were like, in Serbia, we were in Spain, we were in France. We travelled a lot. It was good. It was good times for us'. Adrijana becomes emotional as she continues, 'but now…Oh my god, it's… I don't have a word to describe it. Like I have my body here in Norway, but my soul is down there [in Serbia].

There is silence and emotion, I can only give space. After a while she continues, and it becomes clear that the border restrictions are not the whole story. It is also about a heightened sense of exclusion and foreignness. At work things are fine as it is a German MNC, 'not a small company with just Norwegian people' Adrijana explains. 'It's a mix of everything, we have French people, we have Pakistani people, we have Polish people, we have a guy from South Korea'. The challenge is everyday life outside of work, the talk about 'foreigners' her kids hear at school, the neighbours and locals in the shops who no longer say hello. 'They were reserved before, now we're being seen as plaque. No comments, no contact, not even good morning neighbour. Nothing. They are just ignoring', she says. The Norwegian term 'importsmitte' meaning 'import infection' has become widely used in media and political discourse. The virus comes from the outside, 'we "utlendings" they say, or foreigners, we are like accused to bring the "smitte" here', she says. In such processes of

stigmatization, 'the diseased body and the mobile body appear almost as one', as 'an intruding threat to the supposedly healthy national body' (Adey et al., 2021, p. 3).

'It feels like a punishment'

Mobile Others cast as an intruding threat of disease can also be citizens. As an Australian survey respondent described it: 'Overseas Australians have been referred to as biological terrorists by the Australian (Murdoch lead) media. Public sentiment is that they do not want us to be allowed back to infect the locals'.

Astrid, who is Norwegian and live in Belgium (interview 29 April, 2021) described her experience of entering Norway in April 2021 to end the separation from her partner and work remotely for a 3-month period. 'The border guard he's sort of like, set his eyes on me, why are you travelling right now?' 'Then he scans me, you know, my passport, then he says, oh, but I see you're actually living in Brussels. Then your travel isn't necessary'. 'Unnecessarily travel' designate government hotel quarantine, instead of quarantine in own accommodation. 'It feels like forever I'm standing there and I'm sweating and I'm… and it's all so bizarre. It feels like a punishment. And it feels like I am doing something illegal'.

'Because my family comes from outside the European Union, then they are a risk'

Entry bans based on nationality, such as the EU entry ban on non-EU citizens, produce a significant symbolic impact along with practical and emotional implications, for instance, making it impossible for transnational grandparents to visit and support their migrant children and grandchildren (Nedelcu & Wyss, 2020). Here, I will first turn to Christina's story. Christina is from Ecuador, has lived 10 years in the Netherlands and is now also a Dutch citizen (interview 16 April, 2021). 'I have built up a new life here. I always felt very welcome in the Netherlands'. There was a sense of being different, but nevertheless, she felt welcome and 'not discriminated'. She was very happy with her life, she says, 'but I think it had also to do with the connection I keep with Ecuador'. Christina describes how she would go back home, have her mother over, have her family and friends visiting and so on. 'It made it… made it complete', she says. Her kids have 'two cultural backgrounds', and they are used to being with their Ecuadorian grandmother for months at a time.

> They live with her, it's not just a visit of 'I bring cookies and we drink coffee and then I leave'. They make every single day a life with her for a month, a month and a half, two months. So out of their whole lives they have spent more time with that international grandmother that lives so far away from them, than with their Dutch family close by.

Christina's description of her transnational life before the pandemic echoes what we know from existing studies on migrant transnationalism (Lewitt & Jaworsky, 2007), namely that social life takes place across borders including grandparenting (Nedelcu & Wyss, 2020). Furthermore, for the maintenance of such life worlds, back-and-forth travel is essential—'it is not an optional add-on' (Urry, 2002, p. 263).

In the early stages of the pandemic, Christina viewed travel restrictions as necessary in the same way as other lockdown measures and restrictions on social contact. However, her experience changed over time as the lockdown in the Netherlands was eased and travel restarted, while the entry ban on non-EU citizens remained.

> It was the birthday of my daughter, and I wanted my mother to come here. We had my Dutch parents-in-law, my sisters-in-law, my nephews. We had 16 people here. And I just want one person from my family to come. I want my mother to be here because she has always been here for the birthdays of my kids. […] It was also a period in which tourism in Europe was taking place. People were discussing the whole time: Are you going to Spain? Are you going to France? And I was thinking, I want to see my mother. I don't know where and when I will see her again.

All around her, 'people are having parties, going to concerts, but non-EU family members are not allowed to visit'. Then the first exemption to the entry ban was implemented in the Netherlands. 'So, it all started triggering me, there's something you're not seeing here. There's something wrong'. 'I'm a Dutch citizen, my kids are Dutch citizens, but because my family comes from outside the European Union, then they are a risk'. She describes how her daughters ask her why their grandmother can't come:

> Because of Corona. 'But why is the grandmother of Julia [Spanish grandmother] coming?' Because she's allowed to travel within Europe. And 'which colour does Spain have?' Orange. 'And Ecuador?' Orange. And then they look at me like, yeah, what's the difference? What… what should my answer be? Because your mother and your grandmother come from the third world, you're being discriminated in the enjoyment of your right to family life?

What we see expressed here is the impact of being on the wrong side of the widening gap between those who can travel, and for what purposes, and those who cannot (Adey et al., 2021; Benton et al, 2021; Heller, 2021). This creates the feeling of discrimination as she describes:

> And that sense of… I'm not being treated equally, regarding my rights. It hurts, and especially it hurts because of the rhetoric of the Netherlands. We are a country that respects human rights. We condemn other countries that do not respect human rights. And what do you do with your own nationals within your borders? They disallow us completely. So what's this international rhetoric—a great place for expats when you don't even allow us to see our families?

This is the painful realization that despite having acquired Dutch citizenship, she is not equal, and neither are her children. She has successfully forged a transnational life and become a dual citizen (Guarnizo et al., 2003), but in this moment of crisis, she is confronted with the reality that her transnationalized family can easily be denied the mobility that is existential to them.

'We are burning inside'

Samuel is from South Africa and moved to the Netherlands with his family in 2018 'for a better future for my children' (interview 04 May 2021). 'There is just no future in South Africa, so we decided to pack up our bags and try a future here', he explains. Samuel secured a job in an American MNC before they moved. 'We've been really blessed on our journey here. Great job, bought a house, so it's been really good', although migrating is also 'a hard journey' he says. 'Everybody always says, oh, you're so lucky you can emigrate. Agreed. We are lucky. I don't deny that'. However, being away from family is tough he says, 'my children miss their grandparents, often crying, they are very close'. 'Yes, we can have a chat on a video call, but it's not the same', he says. 'Before the pandemic kicked in, my mother-in-law used to visit every three months' and 'my father-in-law would come visit once a year at least'. Samuel lost his own father in May 2020, and he was not able to fly back for his funeral.

Later on in the pandemic, Samuel's wife had to have an operation and the family desperately needed family support. Samuel describes the experience of trying to 'get permission after submitting a doctor's letter to the Dutch government, asking can my mother-in-law please fly over to support my wife during the operation'. The answer was no, 'it's not urgent enough'. Samuel then asked the question, 'what would be urgent enough for her parents to visit? They answered, if she would be dying within three weeks, they will be allowed to come visit. That is the line that they have set. I mean, as far as I'm concerned, that's a sickening line. But that's the line'.

Samuel tried to make the argument that family support was necessary, 'because I've got to obviously work, I've got to get the kids to school and back, I've got to look after my wife, and all these types of things'. But to no avail. 'There is literally just no sympathy' he says. His experience is that 'they don't care'.

> The guy that we spoke to actually made a joke and said, why don't you look at adopting a family? I was like, wow… And that is from a Dutch government official saying, why don't you look at adopting a family. So, in that sense, it's almost like when you reach out to them for support, they almost think you're a bit of a joke'.

There was nothing they could do. 'We had to just suck it up', he says, 'but at the end of the day, we are burning inside'.

This is the feeling of being discriminated and let down by national governments, as we have seen it running through the stories. As Samuel explains, 'we made peace with the fact that when we immigrated, we knew that we will always be foreigners. That's okay. I can live with it. But it feels like that mindset is even worse now since Coronavirus kicked in, it feels like we are even more discriminated against'. This in turn is making him question the decision to migrate. 'Now in the back of your mind', he says, 'you've got a little voice saying to you, was this really the right thing?' 'My work is as supportive as what they can be. It is the government that is the problem'. 'I have really mixed emotions and the mixed emotions have come to a point where now it's more hurtful emotions'.

'How governments can easily tear a family apart'

In the last two stories, I will turn to long-distance parenthood. Carlos, who is from Venezuela, also has Colombian citizenship and lives in Dubai, shared his experience in the survey. Carlos has lived abroad for 16 years. 'All my 3 children were born in different countries. Each of them have different combinations of dual citizenship, and they have lived most of their lives in countries that are none of their citizenship'. For Carlos, the pandemic had little impact on his job as he described it, 'working from home became available right away at the beginning of the pandemic, regardless of what part of the world you were located in when the lockdown started'. It is in the domain of transnational family life that the impact was severe. At the time Carlos responded to the survey (02 May 2021), his wife and children lived in Spain while he was living in Dubai. Prior to the pandemic, he was traveling to Spain twice a month to visit them.

> I felt very confident during that time that there was nothing that would prevent me to continue that way. Entering to Spain was straight forward with absolutely no issues. The pandemic changed that and made me realize how governments can easily tear a family apart.

'The closure of EU borders' meant that he could no longer enter Spain, despite his wife and children living there, as they are not Spanish citizens and he is a non-EU citizen who does not have a residence permit in Spain. 'Having small children and wife that you cannot see for months has a toll on you and the children' he says. 'It is also unfair that if my family was Spanish then I would be allowed to visit them, as if the virus would choose people by their passport'. Now it has finally become possible for his wife and children to come to Dubai to visit as tourists, 'they are coming in few days', and he is working on trying to get his family to Dubai permanently.

'Being a mother that is apart'

Haylee is from the UK and divorced from her first husband who is also British and with whom she has two children (12 and 13 years old). The family previously lived in Bangkok, and she always wanted her children to have an international life, she explains. In the divorce, Haylee's ex-husband got full care of the children and they now live with him in the UK.

Haylee remarried and she moved from Bangkok to the US with her American husband, partly due to the restrictive UK immigration system, and they have a baby and a 3-year-old. At the time of interview (10 May 2021) Haylee had not seen her two children in the UK since 2019. Prior to the pandemic, long-distance motherhood was working reasonably well, as Haylee describes. 'I went back to the UK a lot and they came over here in their school holidays and everything was… I thought was okay'. The children were at boarding school and Haylee went to see them on stage, to price giving and so on and they would fly to the US using airline unaccompanied minor services. 'That was all working and they were okay about it' she says, but then the pandemic hit. The children's flights over Easter 2020 got cancelled. Her ex-husband lost his job, he took the children out of the boarding school, and they all ended up living with his father and stepmother where there is insufficient space. 'It worries me a lot' she says. Haylee has been parenting via Whatsapp messages and FaceTime, while continuously trying to make plans for flying to the UK to see her children. She feels overwhelmed due to the uncertainty, constantly changing rules in the UK and the US entry ban. She has been unable to get any real clarity as to whether she is allowed to re-enter the US if she leaves and it is also not clear what kind of documentation she will need to bring if she is exempt from the entry ban. She fears being stopped at the border travelling with her two young daughters and denied entry, the US border being 'a scary experience' at the best of times. Haylee is also trying to explore whether her children can come live with her in the US, but it is not possible to apply because of the pandemic, 'so I can't even start that process' she says, and her ex-husband is also resisting the idea. The emotional toll of it all is palpable. 'I'm the worst mother in the world, I haven't been able to see them and I… it's just been horrible'. She talks about how she thinks about it all the time, waking up in the middle of the night. 'It's put a lot of strain and stress on lots of things'. She also feels an increased sense of social isolation from others where she lives in the US, especially other mums.

> They are like "oh I could never do that, I could never leave my children" and I say… (sigh) I haven't left my children. I haven't just sort of taken myself away from them and yet it feels like that and in my… in my darkest moments, I do say I'm the worst mother in the world. I've abandoned them.

Long-distance mothering and caregiving is difficult also in normal times. As existing research has shown, transnational motherhood tends to be emotionally stressful because it challenges prevailing norms of motherhood (Parreñas, 2005). In pandemic times, this became even more acute. Haylee suffers not only from the prolonged separation from her children, but also from falling outside prevalent mothering norms and being unable to do anything about it. 'It's alienating being… I guess an immigrant in a different country anyway. It is hard to get to grips with all the systems and the culture, but I think having been separated from my children and being a mother that is apart—that is really difficult'.

CONCLUSIONS

The stories represented in this article contribute to illuminating the impact of prolonged, involuntary cross-border immobility on transnational lives in the context of a global crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. They show how the impact can be profound, particularly, for those who prior to the pandemic lived intensely transnationalized lives dependent on international travel to maintain family relationships and fulfil social obligations. Constructions of 'home' shifted and changed as longings for the place you came from intensified in the face of its inaccessibility, combined with feelings of having been abandoned and even dehumanized by your country. For others, the feelings of alienation and resentment were in relation to their country of residence where they had previously felt at home and felt they belonged. The pandemic also acerbated the precarity of transnational migrants without permanent residency or dual citizenship, if neither employers nor host or home countries provided support, such as in cases where job loss resulted in work visas being revoked and border closures in country of origin made it difficult or impossible to return.

The stories show how pandemic cross-border immobility significantly disrupted transnational life worlds, both as 'ways of being' and 'ways of belonging' (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004, p. 1010). They provide important insights into the

human impact of pandemic cross-border mobility regimes and highlight the consequences and symbolic significance of intertwined discourses of bordering and othering, which have been further acerbated and reconfigured (Heller, 2021; Nehring & Hu, 2021). Pandemic bordering practices were experienced as increasingly unfair and discriminatory as they wore on throughout 2020 and 2021. Transnational families, thus, found themselves separated by border and entry restrictions 'without-certain-end' (Adey et al., 2021, p. 13) in stark contrast to the resumption of social life around them as lockdowns eased *within* the boundaries of nation-states. It was an experience of 'being relegated to seeing international family only via screens'. Furthermore, nationalist biopolitical rhetoric associated virus spread with the mobile Other. This contributed further to existing processes of normalization of stasis and the 'controlling' of national borders, along with demonization and exclusion of mobile Others (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013). Such exclusionary bordering and othering contributed to a new or acerbated sense of foreignness and for some the painful realization that, whether citizen or non-citizen, as a transnational you are the Other.

The pandemic disruption of mobilities unleashed a 'vast intensification of existing uneven relations of (im)mobilities' (Adey et al. (2021, p. 1). Highly unequal access to vaccines globally, combined with vaccination as a condition for cross-border travel, points to 'even more glaring mobility inequality' in the immediate future (Heller, 2021, p. 126). As the climate emergency confronts us, there is much debate about the environmental impact of international air travel[1], whether for business, work, tourism or family visits. In the event of another global crisis, it is not far-fetched to imagine a future where international travel is heavily restricted for all but the most privileged few (Elliot and Urry, 2010). We could, thus, be facing conditions in which cross-border travel is 'largely permitted only for what is deemed 'essential' to the life of the collectivity and as interpreted by the state' (Adey et al., 2021, p. 13). This is likely to mean 'essential' from a socio-economic perspective as we have seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, at the exclusion of mobility experienced as *existential* for transnational lives and well-being (Salazar, 2021; Urry, 2003). A key issue of mobility justice going forward is, thus, the right to travel for those who need to (Heller, 2021), for the reasons they experience as essential and existential for their lives and relationships. There is furthermore an urgent need for transnational institutional structures more broadly to represent transnationally mobile populations whose rights and needs are largely marginalized by nation-states as laid bare by the pandemic.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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ENDNOTE

[1] Prior to the pandemic, aviation (passenger and freight) accounted for 2.5 per cent of global emissions, which is a relatively small proportion compared to other sectors, but it is difficult to decarbonize and represents a high-impact activity amongst those who fly regularly (Ritchie, 2020).

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