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Of Waters and Bridges

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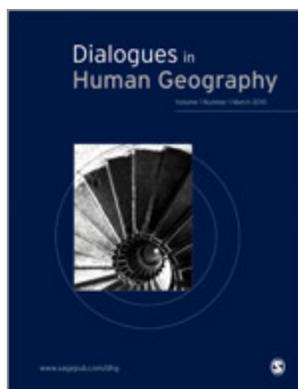
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Of Waters and Bridges

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Keywords:	post, history, naming, temporalities, hope
Abstract:	Oldfield, Robinson, Bartolini, and Drozdewski provided thoughtful and stimulating comments on my article "Keeping you post-ed." My answer will first focus on naming specific periods of time, after which I focus on the impact that the designation 'post' has, and for how long, before moving to the question of new languages. Finally, I'll suggest that we should relinquish the optimism too often nested in a 'post' situation and rather concentrate on labors that convey hope.

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Of Waters and Bridges

Abstract

Oldfield, Robinson, Bartolini, and Drozdewski provided thoughtful and stimulating comments on my article “Keeping you post-ed.” My answer will first focus on naming specific periods of time, after which I focus on the impact that the designation ‘post’ has, and for how long, before moving to the question of new languages. Finally, I’ll suggest that we should relinquish the optimism too often nested in a ‘post’ situation and rather concentrate on labors that convey hope.

Introduction

“[H]istory is like water – it lives between us, and it come to us in waves. At times, it is still and unobtrusive, and, at others, it is turbulent and threatening. Even at its most innocuous, water poses hidden dangers, enclosing contested histories, and so we are always living in the tension between water’s tranquility and its tumult. When we walk along the water’s edge, it’s easy to take for granted the complex process of how that water reached our feet, to overlook what is washed away, what alters and what holds in the sands of time. It is an openness to history as a series of waves, always moving, always in a state of flux, always a site of discovery in the past, present and future, and not as something stable, foreclosed, frozen in the past, that is most troubling to nationalist agendas, because it is too difficult to control.” (Chigumadzi, 2018: 28)

As I was mulling over the generous and brilliant comments offered by Sophie Oldfield, Jenny Robinson, Nadia Bartolini, and Danielle Drozdewski on my “Keeping you post-ed” essay, I went back to Panashe Chigumadzi’s beautiful book, *These Bones Will Rise Again*, from which the above quote is taken. In this book, written during the struggle to oust Robert Mugabe from power in Zimbabwe, she explores her relationship with time, history, and memory as a “‘born-free’ of Southern Africa’s two dominant settler colonies” (Chigumadzi, 2018: 68). Chigumadzi weaves together intimate and family histories, national narratives, contemporary events, transnational trajectories, and spiritual guidance to analyze the space-times of the four Chimurenga, as well as how they combine *chinyakare* (things of the past) and *chimanjemanje* (things of the modern

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3 present). The four Chimurenga (struggle or uprising) refer successively to the anticolonial
4 and anti-imperialist struggle at the end of the XIXth century, the war of independence,
5 the conflicts about land redistribution and decolonization, and the end of Mugabe.
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8 Chigumadzi illustrates how interrogating space-time is always and simultaneously
9 individual and collective, which the *Dialogues* format exemplifies in terms of Sophie
10 Oldfield's (2021) comment that "[i]n it, I find community.". I'll therefore start by
11 gratefully acknowledging the encounters, communities, conversations, collaborations,
12 companionships, and even friendships that have led me to these musings, especially those
13 manifested in the commentaries. Sophie Oldfield speaks powerfully of a "commitment to
14 collaboration"; that is a commitment to bridges in order to straddle and cross the waters
15 of history that "lives between us". She also highlights that situating our commitment to
16 the post "entangles us as scholars in space-time configurations." My personal
17 entanglement is that of a continental European from the French (neo)colonial metropolis
18 – definitely not much post here, alas - who witnessed *in situ* the uncertain irruption of the
19 post in Warsaw in August 1989, in Berlin in November of the same year, and in Pretoria
20 in April 1994. My personal experience of the post is therefore one of uncertainty and
21 tensions, but also of hope – a definite bias that Danielle Drozdowski's text (2021) helped
22 me elaborate.
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35 The commentaries provide sophisticated arguments of how "time and space work
36 together to produce new urban places *with* the past" (Bartolini, 2021); their focus tilt my
37 answers toward issues of time rather than space-time. However, before I address these
38 more extensively, let me evoke two spatial questions in the space-time regime that my
39 paper suggests we address. The first point would be to question the focus on place in our
40 collective analysis. Indeed, my proposition comes from specific places and times, and
41 thus doesn't do full justice to other scales, to spatial networks rather than sites, and to the
42 dis-locations that are part and parcel of the post situation. Second, I find Nadia Bartolini's
43 (2021) valuable further elaboration of brecciation a wonderful example and powerful
44 theoretical tool for illustrating what thinking with space-time can do. As a "process in
45 flux" and not simply an "output," brecciation speaks of places without distinguishing
46 space from time – something that, in practice, is quite difficult to achieve, since we (I
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3 definitely include myself in this!) tend to theorize from specific places *or* moments, or
4 tend to look at one from the other. In Jennifer Robinson's terms (2021), we look at some
5 places from the now, at the now from specific places, new pasts, and revived futures,
6 whatever the case, space and time remain disjointed. This encourages me to enrich our
7 analysis of spaces and times further: Separately, as different disciplines do; in a mirror,
8 examining one side from a specific and explicit vantage point situated on the 'other' side
9 and then switching; conjoined and co-constitutive, which, as I understand it, the
10 brecciation concept allows.
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18 My answer to the commentaries will first focus on naming periods of time; then
19 on what post as a name does, and for how long, before moving to the question of new
20 languages. Finally, I'll suggest that we should relinquish the optimism too often nested in
21 a post situation and rather concentrate on labors of hope.
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26 Naming and vocabularies

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28 As the commentaries highlight, the post labels periods of time, informs us about
29 their supposed nature, offers what Danielle Drozdowski (2021) calls a "specific
30 vocabulary," and describes situations that I believe have specific space-time regimes.
31 However, French historian Dominique Kalifa exhorts us to engage critically with period
32 names, reminding us that while Lord Acton famously told historians to "study problems,
33 not periods," "the period is sometimes precisely the problem" (2020: 8, my translation).
34 Kalifa also quotes a conversation between Gide and Benjamin, in which the former says
35 that "Ce n'est qu'en quittant une chose que nous la nommons [it is only when we
36 abandon a thing that we name it]. Nevertheless, as I have tried to show, post is among the
37 relatively rare endogenic period names, forged and used, among others, by the people
38 who lived the period, and which social scientists deconstructed afterward. Indeed, as
39 Chigumadzi (2018) concurs, by naming the post, it becomes a story we tell ourselves
40 about what has come to an end. We have much to learn from the naming process of any
41 period (Kalifa, 2020): Who defines it, for whom? Who, for example, benefits from the
42 post, for whom hasn't it as yet arrived? How is the term used and by whom? Is it
43 successful or even exported beyond its geographical and linguistic place of production?
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3 The point is not to find an always elusive, perfectly adequate name, but to examine how
4 naming proceeds, and the work that the naming process does in societies.
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7 If the name sticks, what does it do? Danielle Drozdowski (2021) explains that
8 post “locks the present-day identity/ies of a nation to its past,” thereby agreeing with
9 Elder (2003). Drozdowski conclusion is especially true of post terms, such as
10 ‘postsocialism’ and ‘post-apartheid,’ which are rather descriptive and contemporaneous,
11 and point to quite precise, although increasingly remote, spatial *and* historical
12 “containers” (Tuvikene, 2016; Müller, 2019). As such, the mentioned post terms differ
13 from the vaguer ‘post-conflict,’ the more conceptual ‘postmodern’ or ‘postcolonial,’ or
14 the hybrid, descriptive, and conceptual ‘post-industrial’ from which Bartolini discusses
15 my proposition. These are specific national regimes whose beginnings and endings,
16 however plural, can be traced. In such cases, the prefix’s actual ambivalence makes it
17 extremely relevant: Post expresses the temporal rupture and the impossibility thereof
18 simultaneously. It also conveys hope by signaling that everything can end, even regimes
19 claiming that the past, present, and future belonged to them. Such monikers are
20 “appropriately agnostic term[s] to describe an ambiguous present and an uncertain
21 future,” as Müller (2019: 536) explains with regard to postsocialism. Nevertheless, post
22 terms’ descriptive character limits their very usefulness, and scholars have gone to a lot
23 of effort to complexify them by periodizing the posts, by characterizing them (which
24 constitutes part of what I attempted to do in my paper), and by transforming them into
25 concepts. This effort was perhaps especially important for postsocialism. Tuvikene
26 (2016) worked on this conceptualization by de-territorializing the term, in order to
27 enhance its theory-generating potential for urban studies or geography. Müller (2019:
28 538) summarizes the term’s meaning as “a radical openness to uncertainty and surprise,”
29 “a readiness to interrogate Western concepts using the experience of the postsocialist
30 world,” and “a commitment towards impurities and hybrids that reflected a process of
31 transformation in which one order was waning and another one never quite arrived,
32 leaving a state of indeterminacy and therefore opportunity.”
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53 However relevant the prefix, we should address this conflation of a descriptive
54 vocabulary, its condition and space-time, and even its concept squarely. Moreover, how
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3 long does that specific prefix stay relevant? “The meaning of many different elements of
4 South Africa’s cities has been unsettled by the dynamic nature of urbanisation such that
5 the constellations of spaces and times which make sense of the urban ‘now’ bear no clear
6 relationship to the historical object, ‘apartheid city,’” argues Jenny Robinson (2021), who
7 powerfully states that we have to “reach escape velocity from apartheid as the
8 explanatory tether”. While some advocate saying “goodbye” to postsocialism (Müller,
9 2019), and others turn to post-post-apartheid (see e.g. Dubresson and Gervais-Lambony,
10 2018), we should really wonder about who gets to decide when the post is over, and for
11 whom. Furthermore, every vocabulary allows certain things, for instance, the post
12 vocabulary has, for better or worse, crucial strategic or tactical uses in political debates,
13 while excluding others. Post tends to erase the future, and subsume the now into the then.
14 According to Drozdowski (2021), post “produces a norm.” How do we then escape that
15 norm and open up new, conjoined possibilities of understanding the past and enriching
16 our individual and collective “space of experience,” of analyzing the city, of envisioning
17 futures, and enlarging our “horizons of expectations” (Koselleck, 1979 [transl. 2004])?
18 Chigumadzi’s spiritual and physical journey reminds us that part of the work that ghosts
19 from the past do is to inform the future and that many of them are also prophets.
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34 One of my answers to how we can escape that limiting norm is to turn to new
35 languages and vocabularies, to new ways of saying and seeing, whether they are words
36 and metaphors, ordinary words evoking what is not that ordinary, but still belongs to the
37 everyday, to the gaps and frictions between languages, to poetry, graphic expression,
38 photos, and films. Sophie Oldfield (2021) reminds us that all of these constitute a
39 theoretical vocabulary “immersed in practice,” “rooted and located,” epistemological, and
40 political. In this regard, our collective conversation allows Drozdowski’s “potentialities
41 of thinking-with-bodies” (2021) to encounter and resonate with Oldfield’s beautiful work
42 in “Step, step, breathe,” comprising autoethnography, poetry, emotions, literary writing,
43 drawing, animation, and the running body, constructing critical pedagogies to understand
44 and feel the city and “see it anew” (Oldfield, 2020). Transitions often have vocabulary
45 issues, but opening up possibilities and lines of flight also allow for such encounters, for
46 becomings, for worlding.
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Pasts, posts, and futures

Theoretical reflections on the post have tended to favor the spectacular, the dramatic shifts between eras and paradigms. The post is a rather generational idiom, born from the 1980s' and 1990s' political and economic turmoil, as well as from high hopes. Indeed, my interest in the post is part of my temporal and generational positionality on first encountering South Africa as a field. Nadia Bartolini (2021) and Danielle Drozdewski (2021) remind us that there are other, less spectacular posts, such as the post-industrial with its slower temporalities and more diffuse spatialities. Their commentaries reveal that the post should not be tethered to better futures, although powerful narratives – the replacement, however incomplete, of authoritarian regimes by formal democracies – have infused our thinking of the post with (cruel) optimism. The post might just as well be conducive to despair. Opening a space of possibility does not preclude it from being negative. We have learned from empirical evidence, but also from fiction – especially science-fiction, a wonderfully powerful corpus for thinking theoretically about the post – that, for better or worse, the post is never a blank slate. This is worth remembering while we try to grasp the major political and ecological endings that we experience and observe.

I wrote my initial paper before the pandemic hit. The commentaries were written during the pandemic when we all experienced the waiting, the hope and despair, the drawn-out time, and the elusive after. My answer is from their future, because our conversation has temporalities and spatialities. From the here and now of my writing, the past has changed, and what was significant in it has also changed as Robinson (2021) highlighted. From the now, a temporal analysis is needed of the different pasts. Our hopes have changed too. They are simultaneously more modest and grander by referring to meeting friends again beyond screens showing their faces or their typed words, and to building a better “post-pandemic” world, although only a poignantly small fraction of the world is starting to feel that the pandemic is behind it. It is not. Here again, the post prefix carries indissoluble endings and beginnings, doom and hope.

While we take theoretical and empirical stock of what the post(s) comprise, and while we consider whether we should relinquish it as a concept with contemporary relevance, we

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3 acknowledge and assess it. We take the post seriously for what it does, no more and no
4 less. We work on relocating our embodied and engaged scholarships in the now and in
5 the next, on infusing them with possibilities and bridges to elsewhere, namely hope. Hope
6 is not optimism, but it needn't be devoid of grief or memory either, since it "locates itself
7 in the premises that we don't know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of
8 uncertainty is room to act" (Solnit, 2016). Among my personal sources of inspiration to
9 sustain our scholarly labor of hope is reading what political science scholar and fiction
10 writer Malka Older (2020) calls speculative resistance, which is fiction that:

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12 "points out the ways that we need to imagine a better future and believe that it's possible
13 in order to work towards it in significant ways. (...) [W]e need to be able to come up with
14 alternatives, whether they're set in the future or not, that feel plausible to people, and that
15 make sense. Setting aside whether they're attractive or aspirational or not, they need to
16 feel like they're real, like they're possible. Fiction is one really important way to do that.
17 Because we tend to believe in stories as long as they're good stories. And, by good I
18 mean, where the characters and the way they interact with each other make sense to us.
19 It's really important for us to resist inevitability and to resist path-dependence and to be
20 creative in our thinking about the kinds of futures and presents we can create."

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22 Again, words and stories help us open up and see new possibilities. My second source of
23 inspiration is one that Sophie Oldfield (2021) already evoked when writing about critical
24 pedagogies – teaching, knowing that "teaching is a radical act of hope" (Gannon, 2020:
25 5).

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