

Adding an International Student's Voice to the Pandemic Discourse as Thinkers, not Subjects: Reflections on Power, Stillness and Humanness

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ABSTRACT

As of this writing, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on international higher education is continuously being documented, drawing enough, if not too much, attention towards international students. However, the voices of international students remain muted such that much of what has been said about their experience do not directly come from them but from those who claim to speak on their behalf. In this essay, I attempt to add an international student voice to the pandemic discourse by shifting attention to international students not as subjects but as thinkers and co-producers of knowledge in their own right, in hope of also contributing to the broader conversation about ethics and responsibility surrounding international education and international student mobility research and practice. I do so by sharing my own reflections on the crisis and its critical relation to power, stillness and humanness

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, ethics, international education, international student, knowledge study abroad

As of this writing, the impact of the pandemic on international higher education is continuously being documented, drawing enough, if not too much, attention towards international students. As an international doctoral student whose research focusses on international student mobility and education migration, this documentation of the pandemic has offered me a unique opportunity to observe first-hand how the world views international students through the sudden transnational cross conversations among international education pundits, providers and policymakers, as if animating the spectrum of frameworks used to

represent them in extant literature. As researcher, I was drawn to how the mobility of disease has mobilised the many times competing and other times overlapping approaches and lenses applied in the exploration, analysis and interpretation of international student mobility (Bista, 2019; Lipura & Collins, 2020). However, while the global health crisis has afforded these frames to converge around common questions that address the vulnerability of international students (see Raghuram & Sondi, 2020), the questions are largely probed in connection with the vulnerability of countries, industries and institutions dependent on them (see Bothwell, 2020). This very much reveals what views remain dominant in reality, such that attention is skewed towards international students as ‘departing consumers’ and ‘exit and reluctant investors’, critical in revenue generation for universities to survive (Ghazarian, 2014; Pham, 2020) and more broadly, for international education industry to thrive (Lo, 2018). Indeed, the importance of bringing the vulnerability issue to the fore in an unprecedented time cannot be downplayed but in ongoing conversations about the pandemic’s present impact and future implications, much of what has been said about international students do not directly come from the students themselves such that locating them within the pandemic discourse may be easy but hearing them is not.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AS THINKERS?

In general, the lack of ‘active’ international student voice has been acknowledged in recent literature. Waters (2018), for instance, illustrates how economic agenda has dominated the framing of international students rather than them being viewed firstly as individuals (p. 1474). This resonates broadly with the calls to rethink international student mobility research in relation to ethics (Yang, 2019) and responsibility (Madge et al., 2009). But even in the context of “thinking responsibly for and caring about international students” (Madge et al., 2009, p. 35), international students remain as ‘subjects’. This prompts me to ask whether this view may be unsettled by shifting attention towards international students as ‘thinkers’ and co-producers of knowledge. With the pandemic both as a backdrop and subject of thought, I query the following: while international students are widely talked about, what do students think and say about their own situation and the crisis per se? Will not international students’ unique educational experiences and everyday lives as social actors potentially generate critical yet emphatic perspectives to inform, as well as mobilise, both thinking and action around the pandemic? If so, is it unethically ambitious to treat international students as thinkers in their own right, and to thus encourage them to express their views? Or would it be self-serving to do so especially in time of crisis?

I partially approach these questions while acknowledging the potential limits and pitfalls of my own subjectivities arising out of my multifaceted self as an international student, researcher and ordinary human. In articulating my views, I expose my own need, vulnerability and effort to cope while in a position that is spatially, economically and socially ‘privileged’ by being geographically and politically located where international students are considered a “part of the community” more vocally than other places; by having the means to be able write

this reflective piece while embracing the state of stillness; and by being connected to a community locally and globally in a time of physical isolation. In exercising this privilege, I recognise the tension between the tendency to be opportunistic and the accountability attached to such privilege. With this in mind, my intention remains focused on contributing to and possibly shaping a discourse where international students can emerge from being subjects to thinkers with a voice to express one's imaginings such as on what may be considered critical issues emerging from the pandemic, namely, power, stillness and humanness.

REFLECTION

Power

I was born in the so-called Global South, where many countries have been battling one of the world's deadliest diseases even long before the arrival of COVID-19, namely, tuberculosis (TB). Coming from a high TB incidence country, part of my visa requirements prior to my departure as international student was to submit proof that I do not have TB. According to a recent article published in *The Lancet*, a leading journal in medicine, tuberculosis is mainly associated with poor countries and people with poor living conditions (Wingfield et al., 2020). In contrast, COVID-19 has struck major powers with China, UK, US and other major European countries switching places as the pandemic's epicentres (Wingfield et al., 2020). Along with the marginalised, power wielders at the upper tiers of global and local hierarchies are suddenly shaken by COVID-19. Power seems to be overturned not in the sense that there was a reversal of circumstances between the powerful and the powerless, but in the sense that status quo was destabilised, upsetting and unsettling at the same time what and who holds power. COVID-19 and the absence of vaccine also leaves the powerful, vulnerable and the stable, disturbed. This claim, however, should not be taken to mean that the pandemic bears a homogenising effect for all. On the contrary, the impacts of coronavirus, as in any crisis or calamity, are widely discriminating with the marginalised most adversely affected. What makes the difference, however, is the unsettling of power that has placed those who thought were sitting invincible atop their economic, social and professional comfort zones pre-COVID on a condition of uncertainty. Unlike in the case of TB where stakes are mostly exclusive to those who cannot afford immunity and medication, coronavirus and the absence of vaccine has exposed everyone to risk and uncertainty – the degree being nonetheless differential across individuals and societies.

A discussion on COVID-19's impact on the complex structures of power may be reserved for another piece but fundamentally, the disturbing of power should be interrogated as it can be transformatively positive or dangerous. On the one hand, power can be brought to a level of consciousness about the unevenness of our world and be converted into positive action that brings communities together to respond to the crisis. On the other hand, power, when shaken, can be reinforced to restore the 'status quo' of inequality or a create worse version of it. Because the pandemic has made life more difficult 'to control', claims to vulnerability are

increasingly compounded coming even from groups who used to sit comfortably on their stable positions. Caution against rhetoric should thus be exercised, so that the plight of the marginalised are not taken advantage of or obscured by a disguised agenda. This becomes extra critical when vaccine becomes available and hopefully COVID-19 does not end up as another tuberculosis – a problem enduring only at the margins.

Stillness

The global spread of coronavirus is said to have paralysed our interconnected, hypermobile physical world (Xiao, 2020) as countries were pushed to go into lockdown. However, I argue that while the pandemic has discouraged and limited physical movements, it equally encouraged ‘hyper-connectedness’, accelerating formal and informal meetings online that transcend the barriers of time and distance. Spatial absence is replaced by virtual presence, allowing, if not compelling people to be readily accessible and available. Likewise, the pandemic has triggered a parallel acceleration of different types of mobilities such as of corporeal bodies through cross-border exodus of tourists, international students, migrants and citizens back to where they consider ‘home’ or where they have been recalled; of information and images circulating virtually about the crisis; of aid and resources being sought and provided; of ideas and ideologies moving political actions; and of the virus itself and the disease it carries. Emerging from these movements, however, is ‘stillness’, which I describe not as the opposite of mobility or a condition of immobility, but as a state of contemplativeness and introspection re-energised by the pandemic.

Amidst my transnational and mediated experiences of the crisis arising out of my status as a cross-border student, I was drawn to the sense of stillness in different forms. First is the experience of stillness as a conscious pause for reflection – something I thought we have robbed ourselves of as a generation due to our undivided and excessive attention towards ‘having’ or ‘doing’. Such stillness prompted us to think about our ‘being’ – how it was affected by our previous normal and how it is being shaped by the new one. Stillness is also awareness. Despite the pandemic not really slowing us down as we continue to be overwhelmed and preoccupied with the hustle and bustle of the every day, it has made us aware of our own situation in relation to things around us that we had never before noticed or had chosen to ignore. Appreciation, for instance, is better expressed than before, but more particularly for those whose work we now consider ‘essential’. Or that our attention was drawn to the realities of and impossibility of social distancing in urban poor communities, where life operates in restricted and condensed spaces. Even more perhaps is the awareness not of change per se, but of sudden change – that the lives we are used to can change overnight. But in stillness also comes restedness, when our agencies become fully pensive and accepting of the here and now. I contrast stillness with the obsession with the future, specifically of the ‘post-COVID’ future, a new language, if not mindset, that we start to embed in our everyday. Stillness as restedness is not equal to despair, neither is it being oblivious about what lies ahead nor being passive

about the future. If, as what it seems, COVID-19 is a real war, then stillness means embracing the here and now in order to go past it. Surely, the pandemic puts our humanity to test but just like trees that transform in stillness, we, too, can embrace this season with restedness and prudence.

Humanness

If there is any area where we feel the impact of the pandemic the most, that, I would argue, is our humanness. Humanness has many aspects but here I focus on two – our inclination towards humanities and our rootedness in a shared humanity. On humanities, it is worth noting how the crisis has inspired the sudden unleashing of human creativities in forms we have so easily disregarded due to ‘lack of time’ – music, poetry, philosophy or simply reading or engaging in a conversation. The big irony is that as we wait for Science and Medicine to invent a cure, we turn to Humanities – the most devalued in academia – to keep us sane and living. In the same way, the pandemic has shaped our sense of belongingness, restoring and strengthening relationships for some, but also triggering exclusion and even displacement for others. But at the end of the day, it served as a great reminder that wherever we are, whether moving or not, here or there, our rootedness is in our humanity that we all share.

CONCLUSION

While not explicitly on cross-border education, this piece encourages critical and empirical attention towards ethics and responsibility surrounding international student mobility research and practice, where students can be treated as thinkers and co-producers of knowledge. This reflection also offers a critical example of how a student’s own voice and imagining may contribute to a particular discourse, such as on the pandemic.

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