# Article

# Seeing in the suburbs

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In China Miéville's acclaimed science-fiction novel *The City & the City* two different cities exist side by side, in the same physical space, but with residents of each primed not to see or acknowledge the residents, spaces and components of the other. 'Subtly, almost casually, Miéville constructs a metaphor for modern life in which our habits of "unseeing" allow us to ignore that which does not directly affect our familiar lives' (Moorcock 2009). Recognising the diverse ways in which this fictional idea could capture the social spaces of many contemporary cities, we reflect in this piece on one aspect of the notion of seeing and not seeing particular impacts of the coronavirus pandemic, from two similar urban localities in two different cities in two different countries: South Africa and the UK. The reflections are embedded within the historical and structural conditions of each national context as well as their distinct responses to the pandemic.

## Introduction

As the world started to close down in defence against the novel coronavirus attention quickly shifted to the economic consequences of an induced coma, and then, in places with significant already-poor or very poor populations, the likely impact on the poor and the very poor. It became increasingly apparent – at least to some – that the consequences of an enforced lockdown on those without formal jobs (and therefore no UIF or furlough scheme to fall back on), those in formal sectors where businesses have permanently closed (eg the accommodation and food sectors in the UK) (ONS, 2020a and b) or where government schemes do not cover their loss of income, those working in the informal sector, or self-employed, would be devastatingly affected by this.

In South Africa, those living in 'the townships', in informal settlements, in overcrowded and degraded inner cities became, for some, the focus of increasing concern, anxiety and speculation, prompting lobbying and rallying cries to government about the need for support. This economic concern was intertwined with the fearful anticipation of how Covid-19 would spread in these densely populated areas with little public space. In the UK, while urban poverty surfaced as a concern, awareness was often less finely tuned in terms of spatial categorisation. Attention turned to the challenges for generic high-rise residents, with limited access to gardens and public space paralleling concerns in South Africa. Instead, relatively aspatial concerns focused on raised risks of infection for those from black and minority ethnic population groups and the concentrated living conditions of some multi-generational households. A growing reliance on foodbanks[1] emerged as a critical poverty indicator. In both contexts what was less apparent – or less spectacular – were the circumstances of poverty, precariousness and vulnerability also in areas of privilege.

In this piece we take a view from 'the suburbs', a proxy for a middle class relatively privileged position – to the extent that that holds as a generalisation in a context where much has been destabilised, even this. We reflect on the ways in which poverty and the lived experience of lockdown were seen and not seen, during quite distinct lockdown processes, from a narrow window in suburban Johannesburg and in suburban Sheffield. We focus on how poverty and the impacts of the pandemic was being seen (literally and figuratively), characterised and responded to in those in these locations, and alternatively how it was obscured, hidden or engaged with through symbolic and/or arm's length practices. The comparative view from two distinct contexts surfaces the intersections between the power of 'seeing', the structural and material make up of particular parts of our cities, and the politics of knowing.

We argue that mixed access to the public, exposure and 'seeing' is currently dependent on individually organised practices (such as NGOs or church groups) alongside the key role played by online environments. While arguably transformative in some ways, these interfaces also risk producing blind spots in areas where they are absent and forming and reinforcing spatially-differentiated awareness and responses to the pandemic. In themselves they do not tackle fundamental injustice and the pre-existing structure of society underlying pandemic-induced poverty. Yet despite limits these sightlines and their enablers help foster empathy and care, societal traits underplayed in debates on city transformation. The implications

for an alternative future point to the significance of producing awareness and empathy as central pillars of our urban contexts and as contributors to a more just environment. However it also points to the shortcomings of this in isolation of the bedrock of structural state-driven support and more fundamental transformative initiatives in order to reduce the risks of individualising both the lived experiences of Covid, as well as the important responses to it.

## Melville

In Melville we focus mainly on an emergency suburban feeding scheme, drawing largely from media and Facebook postings on it. The Melville Viva Feeding Scheme started on April 16, 2020, during South Africa's Level 5 severe lockdown, when people were almost entirely confined to their homes for five weeks and even public parks were locked and walking in the streets for leisure was prohibited. The scheme initially distributed food parcels to 30 people 'in an effort to address growing hunger in the area' (Viva Feeding Scheme Survey Results). The programme grew dramatically over the next four months, eventually dispensing about 5,600 food parcels in total before it shifted mode in order to try and cope with the demand it was facing. During its existence the scheme revealed the embedded geography of the poverty it was responding to, as well as varied reactions from more comfortable residents, including denial that this was responding to a *local* problem, and a conflation between recipients of the scheme and crime.

Melville is close to the two city universities, major hospitals, and media centres, and is an old Johannesburg neighbourhood which is home to many academics, people in creative industries and some students. Together with the neighbouring areas of Auckland Park and Richmond, it constitutes about a third of the largely suburban ward 87 which has a total population of about 23,700 (Wazimap 2020). Although it is a largely residential area Melville is famous for its strip of cafes, bars and shops, a well-known hang-out area for tourists as well as locals which helped it make it into one of *Timeout*'s 2019 Top 50 coolest neighbourhoods in the world. Reportedly 'every seventh house is a guesthouse or houses an Airbnb' (Edmond 2020). On June 1 the country had progressed to Level 3 restrictions which allowed sit-down meals in restaurants, but significantly for the viability of the industry no alcohol servings or cigarette purchases. But by mid-July only 12 establishments were open, of the 37 that had been serving food prior to lockdown in just three or four blocks on iconic Seventh Street and Fourth Avenue (Edmond 2020).

The economic impact of the shutdown on this vibrant neighbourhood had been devastating.

But initially it wasn't clear that this translated into hunger within the suburb, with few realising that many of the low paid workers in these businesses also lived in and around the area, alongside relatively prosperous homeowners – hidden behind walls in backyard rooms and other rental accommodation. The Viva Foundation's weekly food parcel scheme showed that 'the overwhelming majority of recipients (93.7%) are local to Melville and immediate surrounds, and many (64.6%) are local to Melville specifically' (Melville Viva 2020). As the communication material from the scheme strove to demonstrate, 'these are our *neighbours*, and in better times, so many of them served this community in countless ways' (video on I love Melville Facebook page, posted July 1, 2020, emphasis added). Many recipients had been chefs, waiters, kitchen staff, cleaners, bar persons, security staff, and shop assistants.

A survey conducted in May 2020 (of 316 people) showed that 40 per cent of recipients were employed prior to lockdown, with 65 per cent of these formally employed. 47 per cent of the employed group indicated they would not be returning to their job post-lockdown, with many saying their employer company had closed (Melville Viva 2020). Other recipients had lost income formerly earned as domestic workers or through self-employment, such as 'informal traders, tradesmen, "piece job" workers (handymen taking various jobs where available), an Uber driver' (Melville Viva 2020). A blog provided an example: 'Leah has lived her whole life in Melville and she is raising two grandchildren alone after her son and daughter-in-law passed away. Leah is a domestic worker but she's lost all her income due to the lockdown' (2summers, May 21).

The food distribution scheme grew dramatically – and visibly: once a week early on a Thursday morning there were long, orderly, and carefully spaced queues of people on the pavements around the house which served as the initial distribution headquarters. Under Level 4 restrictions householders were allowed to walk in the streets only once a day, between 06:00 and 09:00, meaning that joggers, dog walkers and families were out and about during the same window of time that the distribution was happening. A blog from early winter noted 'at one point the line stretched around three sides of the very long block between 3rd Avenue, 6th Street, and 4th Avenue. The first people in line told me they arrived at 5:00 a.m., when it is still pitch-dark and cold' (2Summers blog, May 21, 2020). By mid-July the scheme had

grown from 30 to over 400 food parcels each distribution day, with people queuing from as early as 02:00 (Fb ILM, 10 July). By then a local church had offered its premises for distribution. In clarifying that this did not signal Christian requirements or conditions a key organiser noted how welcome the extra space and more 'neutral' location was: 'it is a huge relief to not be operating out of our front garden. If a secular business had offered us their premises, we'd have gone there. But that didn't happen. Everyone of any religion or none is welcome, and all recipients are treated equally' (I Love Melville facebook page).

For people feeling the enormous dread and weight of lockdown and the poverty-exacerbating consequences it was likely to have, seeing people walking through the streets with their large bags of mealie meal and vegetables – approximately food for a family of four for a week – provoked different emotions There was huge relief that someone was doing something, that there was a scheme in place, logistics underway, and ways of contributing to it – including financially. But there was the discomfort of encountering visible need and poverty not usually seen in the streets of the area, except in certain mentally compartmentalised categories: homeless people usually dismissed by residents as social drop outs and 'down and outs', substance abusers; and informal recyclers reclaiming goods on rubbish day, but living 'elsewhere'.

There were other concerns from some established residents: an assumption that the distribution was somehow bringing crime to the suburbs, or a feeling that people receiving basic food to cook were undeserving. A resident's blog recounted how a 'ridiculous woman … marched past with her dog, scowling beneath her mask, and ranted … about how "these people" don't actually need food because some of them are leaving in cars. ("Where did they get the cars?!" she demanded)' (2Summers, May 21). A post on the I love Melville Facebook site complained that 'there is an increase of people who do not stay in the area … I am sure they come for the food parcels etc and soup kitchens but i am sure they are spotters for criminals as crime in the area is beginning to spike … we need to start protecting ourselves against this' (post on ILM, June 22). This comment received some support, with one respondent arguing that those people disputing the post don't see 'the problem and correlation between the homeless and feeding schemes and crime. It creates non-resident traffic into the area and with that you don't know who should be here and who shouldn't. The crime was definitely lower when we had less traffic during lockdown … There is provision made for homeless and

hungry and they should seek help from the authorities. Wake up Melville, before it is too late'.

However, there were a number of counter positions: 'Being hungry doesn't necessarily equate with crime. This comment is a gross generalisation and smacks of ignorance …', and 'So there was a robbery and the best your brain can do is conclude that it's people who get food parcels? Why? Because they are hungry and poor?'.

Relatively prosperous Melville witnessed Covid-induced poverty and hunger in its midst through the significant work of the Viva Foundation and its volunteers. Hitherto unseen resident workers, now unemployed, displayed vulnerability in public spaces, provoking mostly awareness and empathy from fellow residents but also fear, anxiety and even scepticism from a few. Producing detailed and specific information in addition to handing out food, the scheme helped foster acknowledgement of the local nature of need – ie it assisted with 'seeing'. In this sense it was transformative, though the structural conditions underpinning its work remain. The Viva Foundation's practices, while individual, produced communal networking and for a time at least, forged new linkages, in contrast to poorly administered state-directed welfare solutions.

## Crookes/Crosspool, Sheffield

The neighbourhoods of Crookes and Crosspool in Sheffield, UK with a combined population of around 18,000 in 2016 (Sheffield City Council 2017), fall within the relatively wealthy S10 postcode of this northern city, which itself is located within the relatively poor county of South Yorkshire. The combined area is the 25$^{th}$ most deprived out of 28 areas in the city, in other words, not deprived (Sheffield City Council 2017). Crookes is a dense and mixed area with a vibrant student population, nuclear family households, young professionals and some 'original' Sheffielders. Its neighbour Crosspool is more suburban in feel, predominantly nuclear families and professionals living in semi or detached, or terraced housing. The areas contain numerous shops, supermarkets, restaurants, bars and services.

Disaggregated data on the impacts of Covid on local employment rates is not easily available, but at the city scale the numbers of residents using the city's employability services have doubled since the beginning of the pandemic (Williams 2020). In Crookes/Crosspool, historically employment is dominated by professional and associate professional occupations who

in turn are employed in public administration, health and education sectors (Williams 2020), some of the least vulnerable sectors during the pandemic. Workers in hospitality are also locally present with unknown, but presumed catastrophic, impacts on access to paid work. The UK's Covid furlough scheme, constrained provision of universal credit and free healthcare, structure localised experiences of lockdown, and unemployment.

Unlike Melville, the effects of lockdown in Crookes/Crosspool did not produce a locally-targeted feeding scheme, instead local supermarkets, churches, schools and community online groups (particularly Facebook) encouraged residents to support existing, now strained, schemes in adjacent (often poorer) neighbourhoods, primarily through online transactions or the donation of food to collection points in S10. The spectre of poverty and visibility of the labour of pandemic survival was kept at arm's length, accessible online (eg https://sheffields6.foodbank.org.uk/) if you made an active effort to seek it, or through membership of community Facebook groups. For example during April 2020 a resident appealed for donations for the S6 foodbank: 'The good news we have raised £3750 for the foodbank, the bad news is that they are now dealing with 500 referrals every week' (Crookes Community Facebook, April 3, 2020). Visual cues of poverty were also presented locally through posters and signage in shop windows appealing for donations. But these were all 'second-hand' representations of struggle.

Discouraged from driving, residents within S10 took to walking locally to exercise and access food or make use of individualised internet delivery services. Its mid-range supermarkets had (and still have) relatively short queues of two to eight customers awaiting entry, but aside from cost, accessing foodstuff has proved relatively easy. Some visibility of the labour of constrained consumption was evident, but the area's lack of cut-price food offer precluded it from popularity among poorer shoppers.

In contrast to South Africa, with its strict home-bound rules, UK lockdown measures allowed an hour's outdoor exercise daily (unmasked), at any time of day. Buoyed by gorgeous spring weather and 16 hours of daylight, the considerate sharing of public space dominated new-found spatial behaviours, with residents debating online different strategies for managing social distancing:

> Please can I make a polite plea? When we're walking or running in the park, we need to stay 2 metres apart. That's 6 ft 7ins. The length of a very tall man with a very tall hat on, lying on the path. That's how far we need

> to stay apart. Most paths are not 2 meters wide. Especially not when you take away the space that I'm taking up on one side, and the space you're taking up on the other. So when we pass each other on the path, and I move off the path to get further away, please can you move off the path on your side too. So between us there's that imaginary very tall man wearing a tall hat, lying across the path between us. So we can both stay safe. Thank you. (Crookes Community Facebook, April 9, 2020)
>
> Might i suggest going out dressed as Darth Vader and using a 6" broom handle as a light sabre. Anybody that gets sabred.....its their own fault. (Crookes Community Facebook, April 9, 2020)

In practice, and online, tactics for sharing public space were at times the focus of local micro-aggressions. Furthermore, Crookes/Crosspool's residential design norms favour low or limited fencing around properties, with high neighbourhood visibility. Most properties have individual gardens or yards, although with significant variation in size. These features, alongside permission to exercise beyond property boundaries and the rapid rise in home working, compounded neighbourly familiarity and opportunities for encounter, but also accentuated individualised home-bound existences because of the relative advantages of space.

Its location on the western edge of the city, adjacent to the Peak District national park, affords S10 residents with privileged and high-quality public space. Yet the boundaries of walking habits meant little influx or engagement with 'outsiders' including poorer residents, and a frequency of association with known locals – but only those locals who leave their houses, the unwitting production of a spatial echo-chamber. Whispers of hardship circulated nonetheless. Stories emerged of domestic violence, suicide, unemployment and the plight of 'free-school meals' and 'at risk' children who remained in local schools while all other children were 'home-schooled'. But these whispers remained intangible and invisibilised, unseen and unheard.

Localised communal ties were strengthened, by street and small-scale initiatives some (inter)national in conception such as the Thursday night clapping for NHS workers. Cemented further by the actions of various street-based volunteer groups, online community offers and requests, residents produced innovative but often individually-conceived strategies:

> Hi all, There's been a lot going on about Sheffield Mutual Aid and I'd like to help get this up and running in crookes so we can support each other and come together in this difficult time. Steps that would need to be taken. 1. Selection of volunteers from different roads in Crookes offer various services by putting their name, skills and availability on excel spreadsheet

> 2…… Please let me know if you're interested. (Crookes Community Facebook, March 15, 2020)

But these interventions evolved alongside growing dislocation from events, realities and suffering elsewhere in the city and from those within the area suffering unseen within their homes. It is the home-space, identified by feminists as a key site of politics and potential suffering (Blunt and Dowling 2006), that the effects of the Covid pandemic is lived, and also hidden from those beyond its walls. More broadly unless the national press targeted a particular area or economic sector in your own city, news about the harsh everyday realities of lockdown was near impossible to garner. Recognition of the 'geography' of Covid only rose in significance as the second wave of infections and geographically tiered measures were introduced in August 2020, and even then, at the blunt scale of counties. Overall, the invisibility of poverty and everyday experiences of lockdown are reinforced by lockdown measures, structural inequalities, online in/exclusions, and cultures of home-space privacy, in a context of relative privilege.

## Concluding comments

What can we deduce from this short overview on 'seeing' Covid related poverty in these two contexts? Ironically the low walls and visual penetration of life in Crookes/Crosspool did not facilitate the visibility of poverty or of other Covid consequences, while the walled properties of Melville helped conceal the presence of poorer residents prior to the pandemic, with only the particular model of the food hand-out scheme (requiring physical collections) causing the visibility of poverty to percolate into public space. Thus, our first point is the significance of visibility through encounters in public space, and hence the value of designing quality public space and fostering access to open and green space is essential. So too is the design of 'neighbourly housing' which is inviting and productive of casual encountering, and of accommodating diverse economic circumstances. This may not counter or encounter suffering bodies, but it raises the potential for communal belonging, care, and engagement. It does so where visibility translates into a form of acknowledgement and recognition, though it can also foster misrecognition through assumptions and conflations. Second, visibility produced through the media or online networks is critical. Whether it is the work of professional journalists, amateur bloggers and tiktokers or community platforms, investment in, and education about online opportunities, campaigns and ways of learning about others beyond our

spatial or social echo-chamber are critical. This is amply demonstrated in both contexts, and particularly starkly in Melville: the distribution scheme became unmanageable in its former mode due to large numbers wanting to access it, so is now being run as limited home deliveries throughout the week. What emerged into literal visibility has submerged back out of sight and out of daily consciousness for many residents: an apparent pop-up phenomenon appears to have faded away, or simply vanished.

We opened with Miéville's notion of unseeing as a practice cultivating ignorance and avoidance of that which is unfamiliar or unwanted. Placing this within two urban contexts with particular spatial and material realities, we consider how seeing and unseeing unfolds in relation to the lockdown measures implemented in response to the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020 and beyond. Melville and Crookes/Crosspool's city fabrics craft unseeing through high walls, privatised spatialities and elitist consumption, but also through assumptions and perceptions – thus both through physical practices and mental ones. These are emboldened by generations of structural inequalities and privileges. Narrow windows of 'seeing' are however produced and fostered, where the labour of being in lockdown poverty trickles out into public view. Yet these labours and their labouring bodies are not separate. They are part of the productive life force of our cities. Mutually constitutive, they are often part of our neighbourhoods, previously invisible, momentarily revealed, showing the interconnectedness of lives and livelihoods. Reaching across those who didn't see, but perhaps now do, and those who suffer, are urban agents of empathy, producing awareness, demanding visibility. These can be present and online NGO workers, charity staff, local businesses and religious organisations, and resident community groups, striving to ensure the domestic trauma of Covid-19's poverty is surfaced, witnessed and curbed. The temporalities and extent of their efforts, the effort of bearing witness and responding, is simultaneously shaped, exhausted, and at times supported by structural interventions of the local and national state.

As we move forward, empathy and awareness, to ourselves, to all others, visible or not, is critical, and demands more attention as an element towards spatial and social transformation. Lockdown has perhaps produced a rare opportunity, a humanising force, it has made the unseeable seen, it has brought emotion and recognition of the inequities of difference out into the public sphere. Our role is to capture this, and to work towards embedding it within a post-Covid world, one in which empathy and assistance to alleviate

difficult lives are also 'seen' as contributing to more fairness, at the same time as their limitations are made evident. Our role is thus also to confront the limits of empathy manifested as charity: individually significant, indeed critical in times of crisis, but a stop gap within wider patterns of injustice. While empathetic cities can be prompted and energised by social action in particular localities, paths toward deeper and wider transformation need to be embedded by empathetic states, with accountable city leadership as the core to mutual visibility.

## Note

1. A foodbank is a charitable organisation which collects and distributes food items for free to those in need.

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## Addendum:

*Reviewer comment*

I found some inconsistencies here: for eg the authors seem unhappy (in terms of visibility) that food parcel distribution through queuing [visible] in Melville developed into [invisible] home delivery and so out of the 'daily consciousness for many residents' of Melville. Seems to imply it was better (for whom?) to have a visible queue of hungry who had stood for hours? I get the point that lockdown 'made the unseeable seen' and thus offered a rare opportunity, but the logic of this can be pushed too far as in the example above?

*Authors response*

On the specific example provided by the reviewer, we note that the shift to home deliveries may well be more practical, comfortable and dignified for those receiving food parcels (and we recognise that their perspectives are not visible in this piece). Commenting on the queue having disappeared was not intended to celebrate the spectacle of poverty but to observe that direct visibility had prompted a form of learning as well as new forms of community networking simply through its visibility, and that as this as well as other interfaces and platforms disappear, the potential resurfaces for some of us to revert to our spatial and social echo-chambers.