

**Intervention Symposium:**

**“The Sanitization of/via Populism during the COVID-19 Pandemic”**

**Introduction**

Nicholas Abrams, Ferda Demirci, Sophia Jaworski, and Jesook Song

Department of Anthropology

University of Toronto

sophia.jaworski@mail.utoronto.ca

If curing COVID-19 and its socio-economic repercussions has become the new global imperative, what has become of populisms leading up to, and during, the pandemic? In some cases, populist movements survive as democratic excess in a time of emergency, while in others they survive as more complex and contradictory state policies in tension with demands for large-scale social change.

The pandemic has so far provoked “sanitization” of public spaces and public life, but also of capitalist ills and politics. It remains to be imagined what new cleavages and enemies might be sketched by populist politics as a result of the pandemic.

As a group of doctoral candidates and faculty in the Anthropology Department at the University of Toronto, engaged in dialogue on leftist interventions in (settler or post) colonial, fascist, financialized capitalism, since the beginning of the pandemic we have paid particular attention to how forms of sanitization in practice and as metaphor are crossed with populist politics. The following four short pieces take up speculative modes of imagining the significance of the relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic and populism. Each piece represents a different “moment” on this timeline, and focuses on different aspects: public shaming, chemical exposure, universal basic income, and national debt. Diverse perspectives from fieldwork in South Africa, Turkey, South Korea, and Canada, respectively, inform our current collaborative forms of thinking.

Nicholas Abrams and Sophia Jaworski explore how populism is being sanitized: in this, Abrams explores the political nihilism inherent to the spectacle of violent viral videos shot and disseminated amid both the Black Lives Matter protests (over the summer of 2020) as well as amid the culture war surrounding the efficacy and public duty of wearing masks in stores and other public spaces. Conversely, Jaworski reveals how chemical exposure has been forced onto many essential workers amid the emergent global phenomenon of sanitation tunnels couched in a rhetoric of protection.

But populism is also itself sanitizing: For Jesook Song, South Korea's universal basic income programs involve a process of double sanitization – appeasing and fertilizing the socio-economic “ills” of capitalism simultaneously. Similarly, Ferda Demirci discusses the Turkish state's debt-oriented economic recovery programs and attends to how interest-bearing consumer loans during the pandemic come to be presented as “state-care” in line with a populist appeal for “national financial solidarity”.