

# Reconstituting Space: The Transformation of Non-Places through the Covid-19 Pandemic

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## *Abstract*

Using the theoretic framework of *supermodernity* as it applies to late-stage capitalist spaces of transience and consumerism, I examine the way the COVID-19 pandemic has shifted our physical and mental experience of shared space. Marc Augé's (1995) text explores the concept of liminal, substance-less, isolating shared spaces in which identity and community are absent. Looking at the way our mentalities shift while reckoning with a global pandemic, I find the spaces Augé constructs are now areas of fear, apprehension, and have/embody a focus on physical monitoring. "Non-places" take the shape of supermarkets, shopping malls, airports, buses, railways, and similar locations which you move through as a nobody. The fear of transmission has permeated our day-to-day, re-constituting these places. The lines in the grocery store guiding your movements and the sanitized card readers all reaffirm your location in the pandemic world. In this paper I explore the functions of this transition with reflection on how it shifts our sense of self and anxieties operating in the world, how the self is constructed in relation to the other, and how COVID-19 shifts this worldview. Recognizing this film of anxiety over previously devoid spaces deepens a recognition of COVID-19 as impacting our way of moving in the world at a fundamental level and questions its impact on future ways of moving through these spaces.

## **Introduction**

Marc Augé's seminal text "Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity" (1995) explores the burgeoning world of supermodernity and the "non-places" it creates, such as shopping centers and public transport. These non-places and the way we interact within them are marked by absence, shallowness, and solitude (Augé 1995). In the Covid-19 pandemic, these non-places are becoming loci of fear and apprehension, where the self and the other are carefully monitored, and each person is constituted in reference to each other, or more accurately, in reference to the space between them. In this essay I will examine how the Covid-19 pandemic has shifted Marc Augé's "non-places" (1995), specifically through the analysis of changes in the temporal, spatial, and identity excesses of supermodernity. The Covid-19 pandemic is transforming the way non-places function in our lives, reshaping how we feel in them, and crafting new individual and social identities. Spaces of "solitude, and similitude" (Augé 1995, 103) are recast as spaces of apprehension, risk, and hyper self-awareness.

Augé's supermodernity is our current state of excess (1995, 29), the co-creation of late-stage capitalism and globalization in an accelerated world. Augé argues this acceleration is

marked by time, space, and identity (ego). In the era of supermodernity, things move faster due to the constant deluge of noteworthy events; history and the present are woven together. Space is felt as an excess as the world shrinks due to increased accessibility. The ego or identity is in excess in that “the individual wants to be a world in himself” (1995, p. 37). Individualism reigns over collectivism and globalization perpetuates this individualism through the ideals of a market economy (Dascălu 2020).

Supermodernity has led to the construction of non-places. Augé posits non-places in opposition to ‘anthropological places,’ which are localities in which tradition, socialization, ritual, and depth of human interaction occurs (Augé 1995). A non-place is a place in which absence and solitude reign, a place where the individual is constituted by the activity, as a consumer or commuter. Non-places take the shape of supermarkets, shopping malls, airports, buses, railways, and similar locations which you move through as nobody. They can be contrasted with your local corner-store where you are recognized by the owner, the beach where you go with friends, your church, and other spaces where one is observed. In these localities you are known; you are functioning, socializing, and recognizable. In non-places, the whole obliterates the self within them. Non-places are subjective — what is to you a workplace could be, to me, a non-place. The shopping mall one socializes or works in is the area another passes through, disengaged and isolated in the masses. Supermodernity facilitates an increase of non-places which counteract ‘places for living;’ places made to be relational and embedded with meaning: “Where individual itineraries can intersect and mingle, where a few words are exchanged and solitudes momentarily forgotten” (Augé 1995, 66-67). Non-places emerge where communication is limited and impersonal — one enters primarily to accomplish a task.

Supermodernity is recognized by Augé as informed by an excess of time, space and identity; these parameters are the foundation on which non-places are built. In looking at public transportation, airports and large grocery stores, we see how these non-places built on the excess of time, space, and identity have been fundamentally transformed by the pandemic. Time shifts and space is contested, people no longer travel across the world, and instead are extremely limited in their accessible space. Notions of self and others are reconstituted, as people find their place in new moral imperatives and isolation (Prosser et al. 2020). Through spatial reconstructions, temporal experiences, and the redefinition of selfhood, the Covid-19 pandemic has turned our experience of supermodernity on its head.

## **Space**

Non-places, according to Marc Augé, are sites to be passed through, where you don’t leave a mark and which don’t leave a mark on you. Of non-places Augé writes, “a person entering the space of non-place is relieved of his usual determinants. He becomes no more than what he does or experiences” (1995, 103). Since Covid-19, this is no longer true; the determinants now paramount to our lives are heightened in non-places. contested space of the pandemic, where transmission could occur.

There is a new form of acceptable social behaviour in these areas which is carefully monitored by the collective, not just the authority (James 2020, 189). This collective, unspoken monitoring of each other for rule following, keeping distant, mask wearing, sanitizing etc. creates an environment in which the individual is hyper-aware of the way they operate in that space (Prosser et al. 2020). Where prior to the behavioural shifts brought about by Covid-19, non-places were moved through absentmindedly, now anonymity and negligibility is replaced with hyper self-consciousness in relation to others.

Marc Augé talks of itineraries being paramount to the non-place experience, the functionality of thousands of converging itineraries shaping the noise and chaos which leads to isolation and identity-less operations in the non-place. Airports are emblematic of non-places as they are the intersection of many of these itineraries. Planes fly in and out, taxis pick up and drop off, people race from gate to gate, and people pause, wait in lines, wait in lounges, wait to be picked up. All this bustle of activity means that for the most part, airports are not destinations, but a means to an end. The traveller is faceless, nameless, and full of potential. Covid-19 has completely transformed the way these spaces are conceived of. The traveller is no longer cosmopolitan and seamlessly moving through a frenetic space. “Air passenger traffic declined 98% in April as the pandemic hit” (Abou-Ragheb 2020). What were once choreographed dances of all these moving parts have become shells of what they once were (Hull 2020). Due to airports and air-travel being at the pinnacle of virus movement around the globe (Tirachini & Cats 2020) they are an exceptionally poignant space of fear in the pandemic world.

Before Covid-19, certain localities functioned as the interim; the bus was the line between ‘point A’ and ‘point B’, the grocery store was the errand on the way home, where you hurried through the nothing space to accomplish the straightforward task — purchase, travel, wait. Now these spaces are the event in a day of isolation. Working from home, it might be your only outing, at risk and perceived as entering a danger zone. The pandemic has highlighted non-places as high-risk areas (Honey-Rosés et al. 2020), places frequented by many, where the unknown is much greater than the known. Grocery stores have been in the media and present in our minds since the early days when stockpiling and hoarding were a concern (D’Innocenzo 2020). Grocery stores were once a non-place where identity was mitigated by the activity of consumerism. Now they are a common site of anti-mask protest and aggression (Judd 2020). In the Covid-19 era, grocery stores are more than anything a space of fear, intensity, and politics.

## **Time**

Covid-19 has disrupted supermodernity’s marked excess of time, and confirmed it in different ways. For example, the phenomenon of waiting in the pandemic is markedly different. Non-places were both rushed and suspended. The airport and grocery stores saw marked moments of hustle emblematic of late stage capitalistic movement patterns, combined with moments of incontestable standing in spaced out lines, where the only activity available was suspended waiting. These experiences have been transformed in Covid-19. Movements must be more careful; time is slowed in that the activity of grocery shopping or moving through public

transportation requires more patience and care. Only certain numbers are allowed inside the store or on the bus and distance must be maintained at stations and in line-ups. No longer is the individual on autopilot, cruising the same tired aisles on the way home from work. Now this may be the singular outing, stocking for a week's worth of food. In addition, the act of quarantine itself is waiting: "millions of people around the world wait under various forms of quarantine" (Andits 2020) but this waiting occurs with no known end point. With the tension of risk and the slowing down of hurried activities, we are suspended in non-places in unordinary ways. Waiting in fear or waiting in hope, the way we move through this temporal experience is profoundly altered from previous experiences.

Augé's description of time in supermodernity is also confirmed by the Covid-19 pandemic world. Our collective awareness of marked events, events which change our perception of the world, is overwhelmed by the reaches of globalization and global awareness (Augé 1996, 29). Augé's description of time in supermodernity as "imminent history, [and] of history snapping at our heels" (Augé 1995, 30) is almost portentous of the Covid-19 experience of time, as we are all aware of living through history. The overwhelming rush of historical events as they are happening makes time feel accelerated and history a thing of our lived experience. We are experiencing the slow crawl of activities informed by and acted out through pandemic guidelines paired with the hyper-acceleration of sensational time.

## **Identity**

Supermodernity is also facilitating an identity crisis. Augé writes that never before "have the reference points for collective identification been so unstable" (1995, 37). The shape of the world as crafted through globalization and economic networks has increasingly marred the sense of in-group and out-group. The foreign and elsewhere is intimately connected to our lived reality through access and exposure (Cuberos-Gallardo 2020).

Much like its impact on space and time, the Covid-19 pandemic has restructured globalization and how we interact with the broader world, fundamentally influencing our perception of identity. Now the near and immediate poses the most threat and the distant, through internet connection and media, poses the least threat (Cuberos-Gallardo 2020). While at first, blame was cast on a foreign other, now the other is all-encompassing. Arpan Roy in "Fear of others: thinking bio politics" (2020) explains how the virus's fundamentally egalitarian nature creates a fear of the 'other' that is not the 'other' in the foreign, "ethnic or cultural other" (Augé 2020, 18), but the 'other' as any body not yours. Augé claims that there is no absolute individual, we are constituted in terms of collective identity and the isolation of one has embedded the whole within them, as we are inseparable from our socialization and culture. We have wrapped up in ourselves our relationships, resemblances, and identity markers..

While this conception of identity is true as a foundation of social relations, the Covid-19 pandemic response of isolation and distance disrupts this. The 'other' becomes the threat, and the virus makes a threat out of everyone. To some degree the "bubble" is the self, and the 'other' is the whole of the world whose movements and interactions you are not carefully aware of.

Distancing has created this strange demarcation. DeJousein De Klerk in his examination of the way quarantine is reshaping our interactions says that, “We — our family unit — are the safe ones. But those who were extensions of our safe unit — our parents, siblings, friends — are the dangerous others to whom we are dangerous too” (2020, 225). All of a sudden “bubbles” are being created and negotiated, which carefully demarcate the in and out group. Identity as social relations is defined in terms of the few tapped to join up, as roommates, families, maybe co-workers, or a friend or two.

## Conclusion

In the past year we have reconstructed society in many ways. In some areas we are lagging and in others we’ve adapted with speed and grace. The ways we experience space, time, our identities, and those of others since the beginning of the pandemic may be permanently distorted through this reshaping (Honey-Rosés et al. 2020). The way fear and apprehension in non-places creates a new identification in these contested areas superimposes another layer of uncertainty in an uncertain world. Setha Low and Alan Smart (2020) ask whether this new paradigm in public spaces could reinforce separation and hierarchies with a racial or class bias (2020, 3). While reckoning with the social and material consequences of Covid-19 and tangible loss, of routine, of loved ones, of plans and goals, of safety and security, we are also reckoning with an unseen and unrecognizable shift in the way we inhabit shared space. Non-places are representative of our supermodernity, with all its excesses, but they are comfortable in that they are known. The time on the bus from home to work is a time where you could pause the self and its inherent responsibilities and submerge yourself in the faceless crowd. In the grocery store or shopping mall your task was defined and manageable; in the airport you moved through that space in anonymity and with the safety of direction. Now our experiences of these non-places are warped and reconstituted. Reckoning with the renegotiating of shared space, ripe with danger and potential contagion, we move through non-places with the tension of the pandemic in the air.

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