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Editorial

Politics and Space

Fenced In

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In March 2020, as Covid-19 cases soared, the Swiss Federal Council imposed a lockdown across the country, closing the borders to all but essential travel. This graphic account explores how intimate bodies, state borders and invisible enemies were made material during this crisis.

- Juliet J. Fall,
Département de géographie et environnement, Faculté des Sciences de la société, Université de Genéve, Switzerland.
Email: Juliet.Fall@unige.ch

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Fenced In
POLICE ZONE INTERDITE
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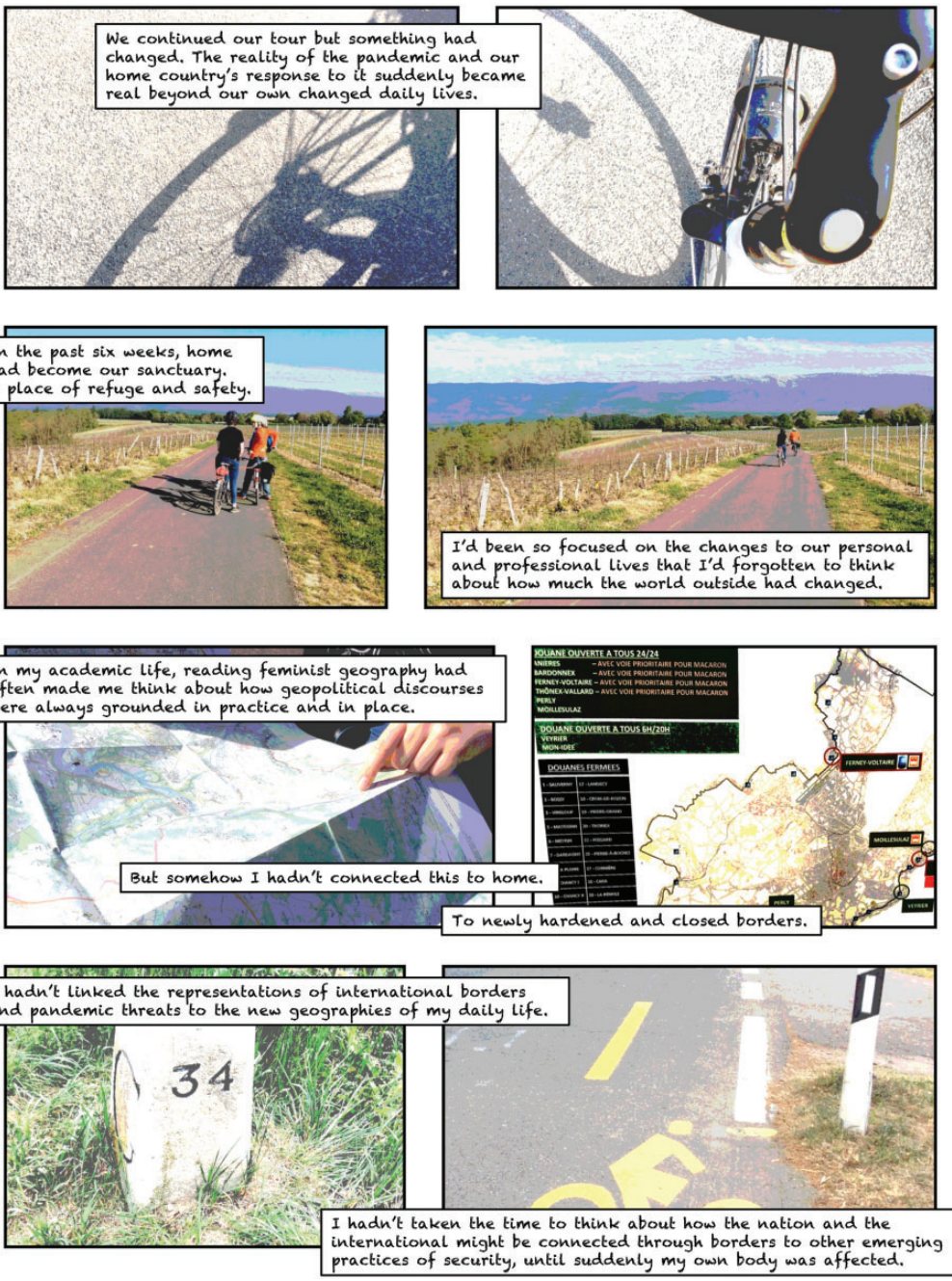
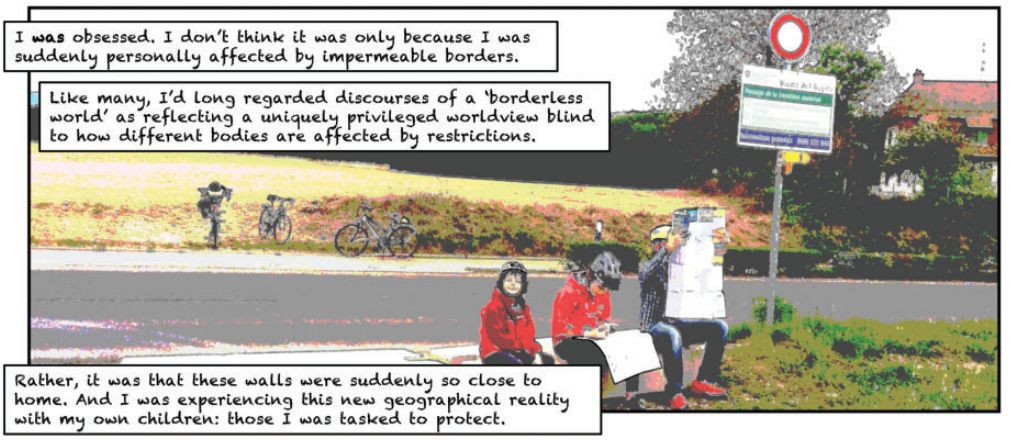
Juliet J. Fall
Département de géographie et environnement, Université de Genève
juliet.fall@unige.ch

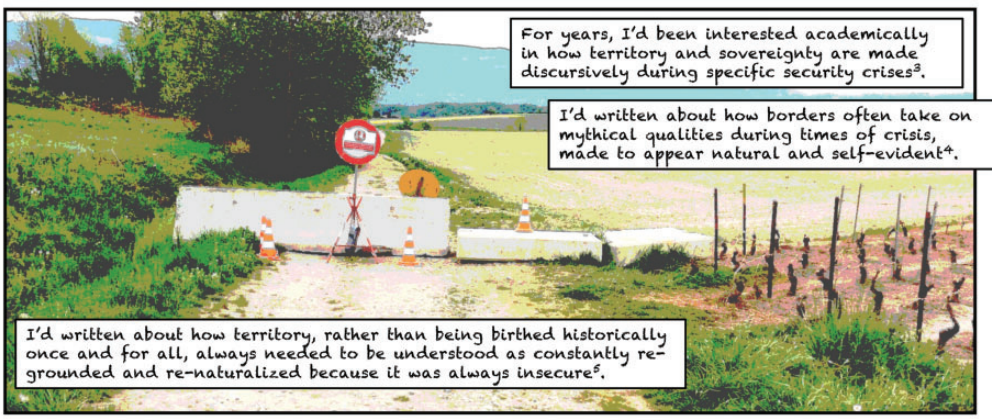
Covid-19 Pandemic. March – May 2020.
Our family of four, living in Geneva, Switzerland, was going round in circles inside at home, day after day.
One weekend, we took out our bicycles, lucky to live in a country having chosen only semi-confinement[1].
The children, aged 13 and 11, had been struggling with their own workloads, free times and emotions.
I'd been finding it hard to concentrate, learning new online teaching skills. My partner had been equally glued to his screen.
A bike tour promised some fresh air and exercise. But these were not ordinary times. Ordinary choices were fraught with risk.
We chose our route to avoid meeting others, newly mindful that any sick body, close to ours, could harm us most. A friend. A neighbour. A passer-by.
Danger could come from those close enough to touch or sneeze on us. We carried hand sanitizer and homemade masks.
Magic talismans that might keep us safe, even if we never used them.

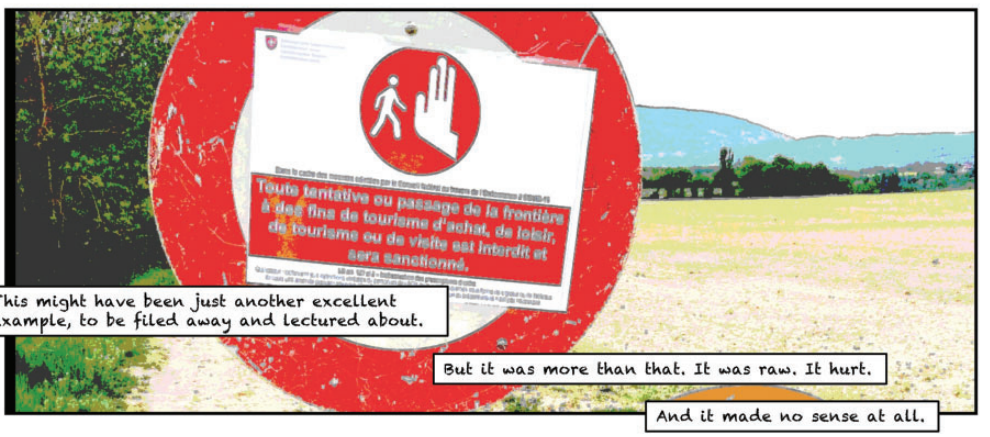
Geneva is a small Canton in Western Switzerland, almost entirely surrounded by France. We thought we'd take a brief look at the border. We knew it was meant to be restricted to essential traffic.
We stopped to read the map under a surveillance camera, close to a large border crossing in Bardonnex. The motorway was spookily empty. We felt oddly nervous.
As we cycled along an empty field, we saw a fence along the border: blocking off a small path across a bridge that connected two empty fields. It must have been put up in a rush, following a quick decision. I wasn't expecting that.
It looked both official and improvised: an odd mix of road fences, tape, chains, printed signs and references to emergency laws.
"No crossing or attempted crossing allowed for shopping, leisure, tourism or visiting".
Toute tentative ou passage de la frontière à des fins de tourisme d'achat, de loisir, de tourisme ou de visite est interdit et sera sanctionné.
The border we usually crossed without thinking was suddenly completely shut to us. We were fenced in.
The Schengen Agreement, allowing free movement, was suspended[2].


We continued our tour but something had changed. The reality of the pandemic and our home country's response to it suddenly became real beyond our own changed daily lives.
In the past six weeks, home had become our sanctuary. A place of refuge and safety.
I'd been so focused on the changes to our personal and professional lives that I'd forgotten to think about how much the world outside had changed.
In my academic life, reading feminist geography had often made me think about how geopolitical discourses were always grounded in practice and in place.
But somehow I hadn't connected this to home.
To newly hardened and closed borders.
I hadn't linked the representations of international borders and pandemic threats to the new geographies of my daily life.
I hadn't taken the time to think about how the nation and the international might be connected through borders to other emerging practices of security, until suddenly my own body was affected.

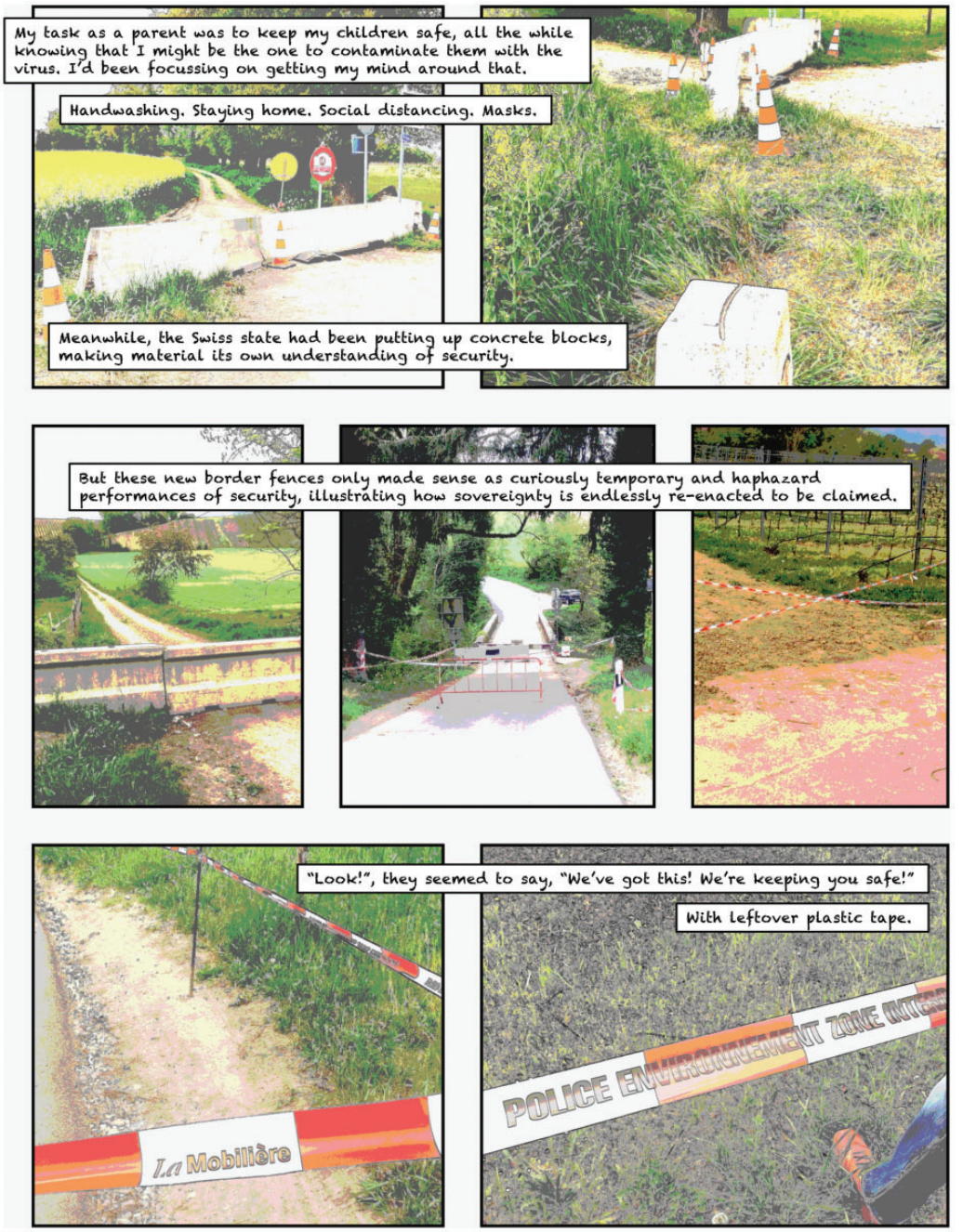
As we cycled in the dry landscape, we saw that new fences and walls had been built all along the international border, often put up overnight.
50
Croix-de-Rozon
GE
E CROIX-DE-ROZON
ZOLL
DOUANE
Route du
Pont-de-la-Fin
COLLON
We could look at them. We could photograph and touch them. But we certainly were not authorized to cross and leave the country.
I was mesmerized, finding reasons to return, visiting as many different sites as I could.
"Come on, children, let's do another bike tour!", I'd say. My partner, happy about my apparent new love of exercise, was always game.
The children were pleased to have some fresh air, despite a few grumbles. "I like these trips to the border, but... well... Seen one, seen them all, right?", said my daughter.

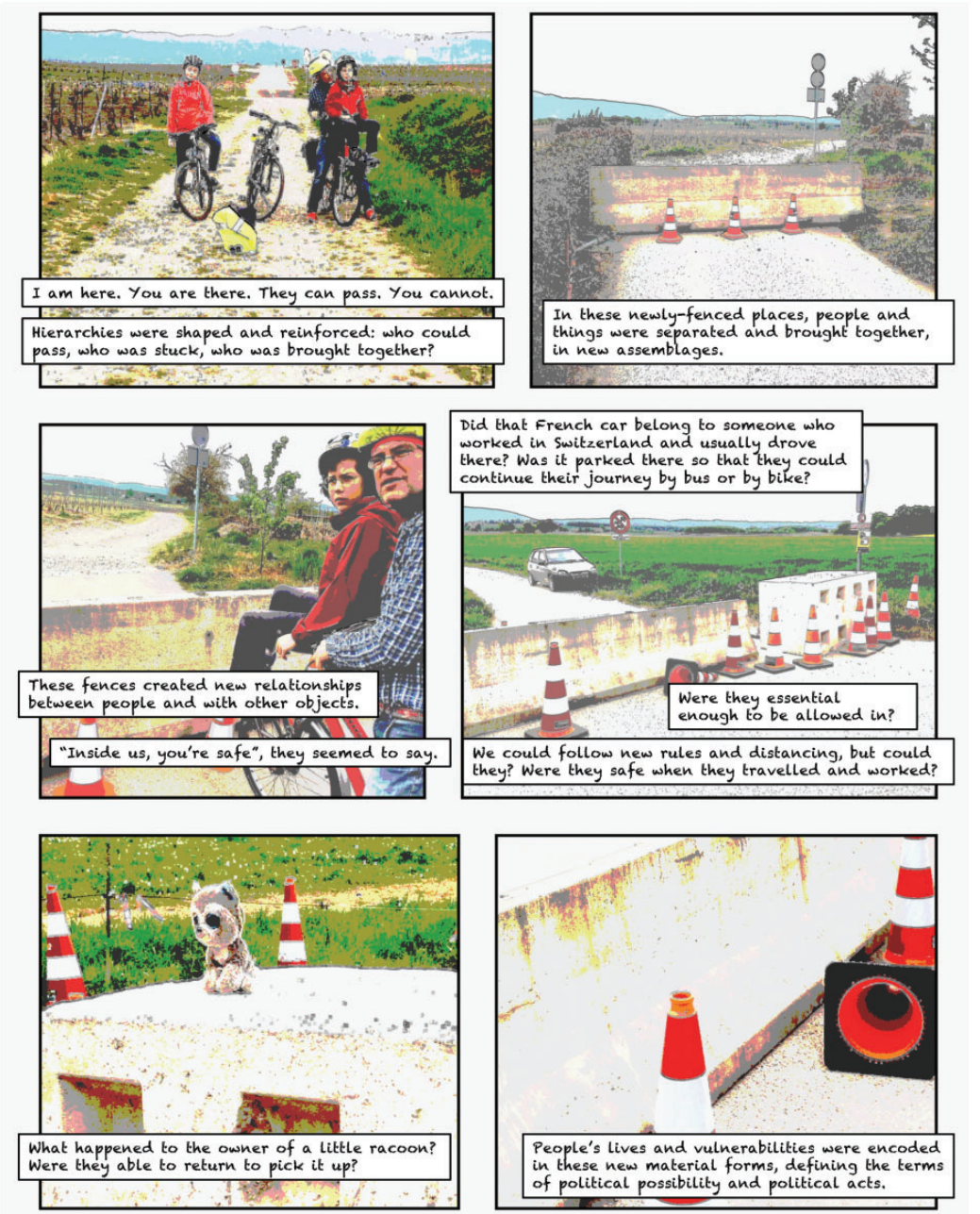

I was obsessed. I don't think it was only because I was suddenly personally affected by impermeable borders.
Like many, I'd long regarded discourses of a 'borderless world' as reflecting a uniquely privileged worldview blind to how different bodies are affected by restrictions.
Rather, it was that these walls were suddenly so close to home. And I was experiencing this new geographical reality with my own children: those I was tasked to protect.

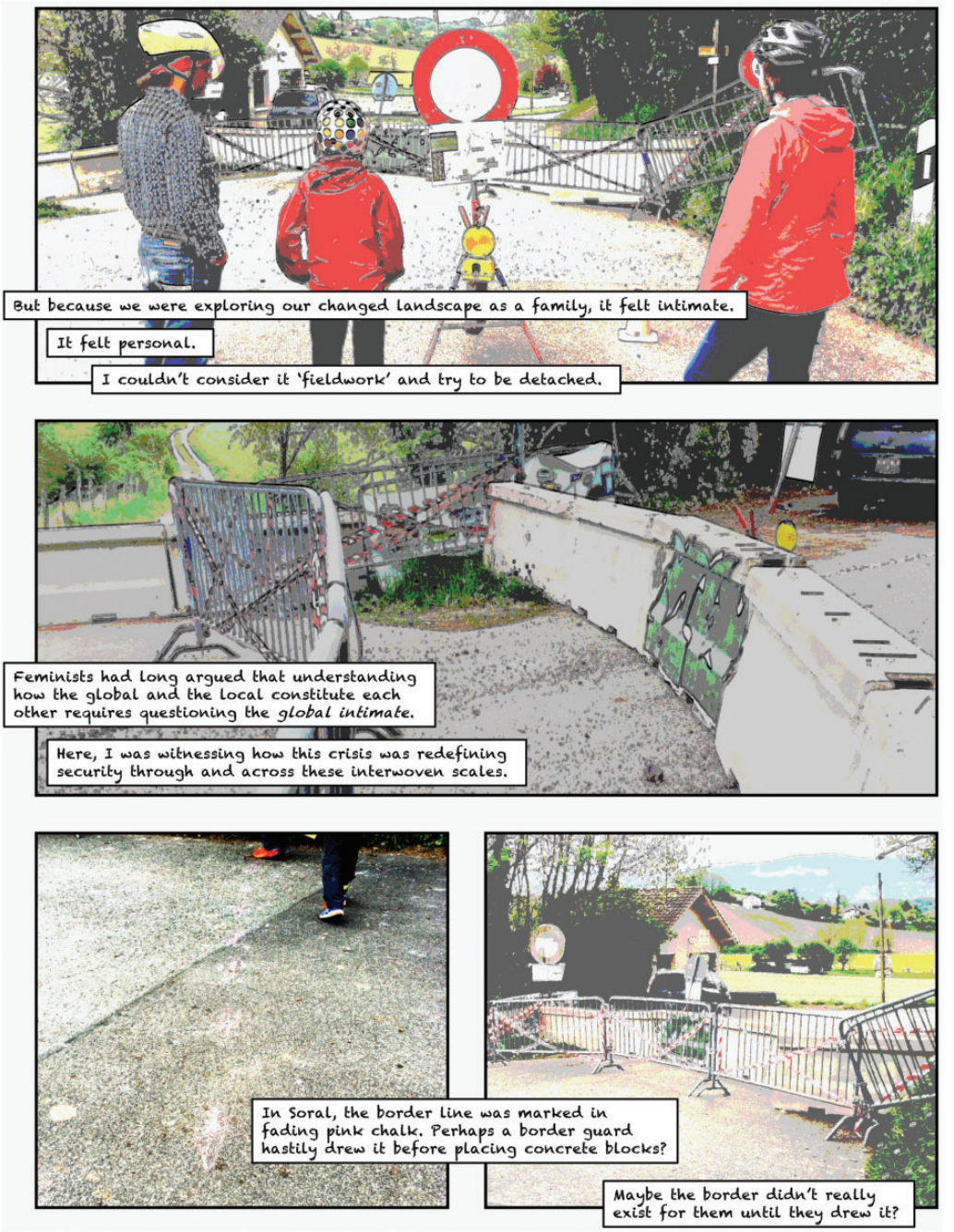

For years, I'd been interested academically in how territory and sovereignty are made discursively during specific security crises[3].
I'd written about how borders often take on mythical qualities during times of crisis, made to appear natural and self-evident[4].
I'd written about how territory, rather than being birthed historically once and for all, always needed to be understood as constantly re-grounded and re-naturalized because it was always insecure[5].

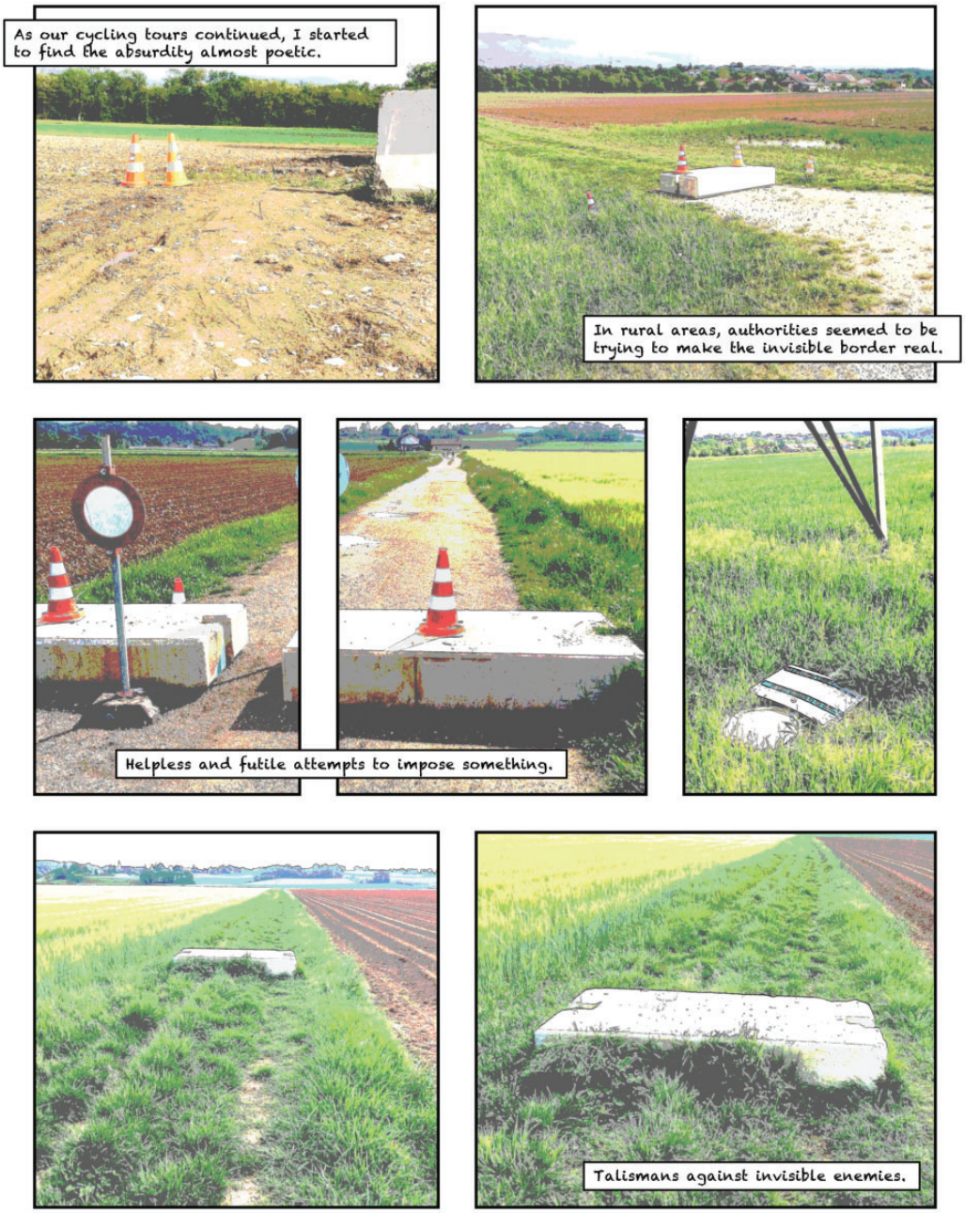

Toute tentative ou passage de la frontière à des fins de tourisme d'achat, de loisir, de tourisme ou de visite est interdit et sera sanctionné.
This might have been just another excellent example, to be filed away and lectured about.
But it was more than that. It was raw. It hurt.
And it made no sense at all.

Feminist geographers have taught us how our own bodies are sites and spaces for connecting the global and the intimate.
FERMETURE PROVISOIRE
de 19 30 à 6 00
I realized that my compulsion to witness these new border walls, and watch them change a little each day was an attempt to make sense of this.
My body and those of my children were the scale at which power operating at larger scales could begin to be understood.
I tried thinking though our bodies as the site upon which the new ideas, ideologies, and politics of the pandemic were being performed and made meaningful.
This had to combine an attentiveness to political representations and to practice to make sense of a fundamental disconnect.
If the bodies of those closest to me represented the main threat of contagion, then why close international borders?

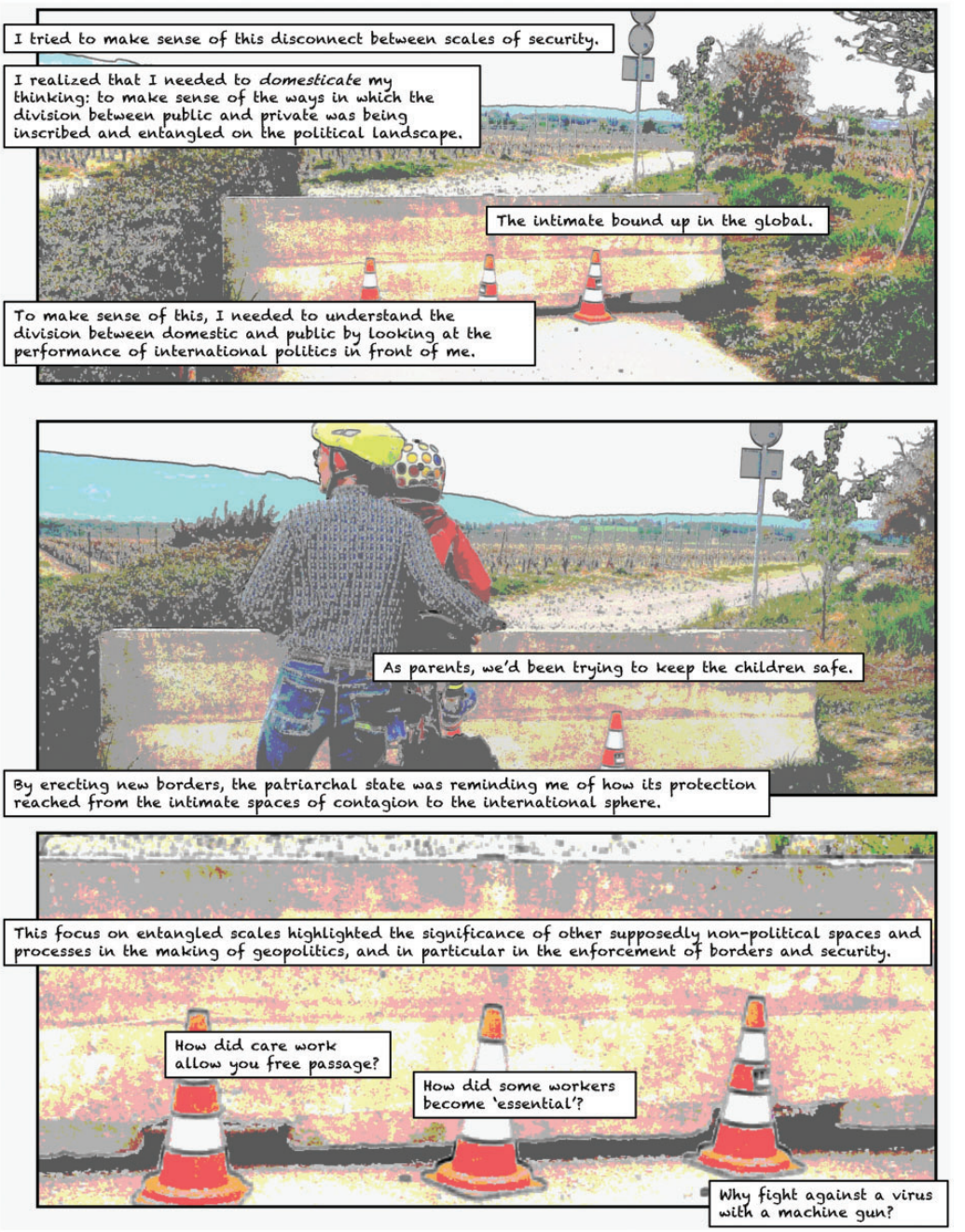

My task as a parent was to keep my children safe, all the while knowing that I might be the one to contaminate them with the virus. I'd been focussing on getting my mind around that.
Handwashing. Staying home. Social distancing. Masks.
Meanwhile, the Swiss state had been putting up concrete blocks, making material its own understanding of security.
But these new border fences only made sense as curiously temporary and haphazard performances of security, illustrating how sovereignty is endlessly re-enacted to be claimed.
"Look!", they seemed to say, "We've got this! We're keeping you safe!"
With leftover plastic tape.
La Mobilière
POLICE ENVIRONNEMENT ZONE

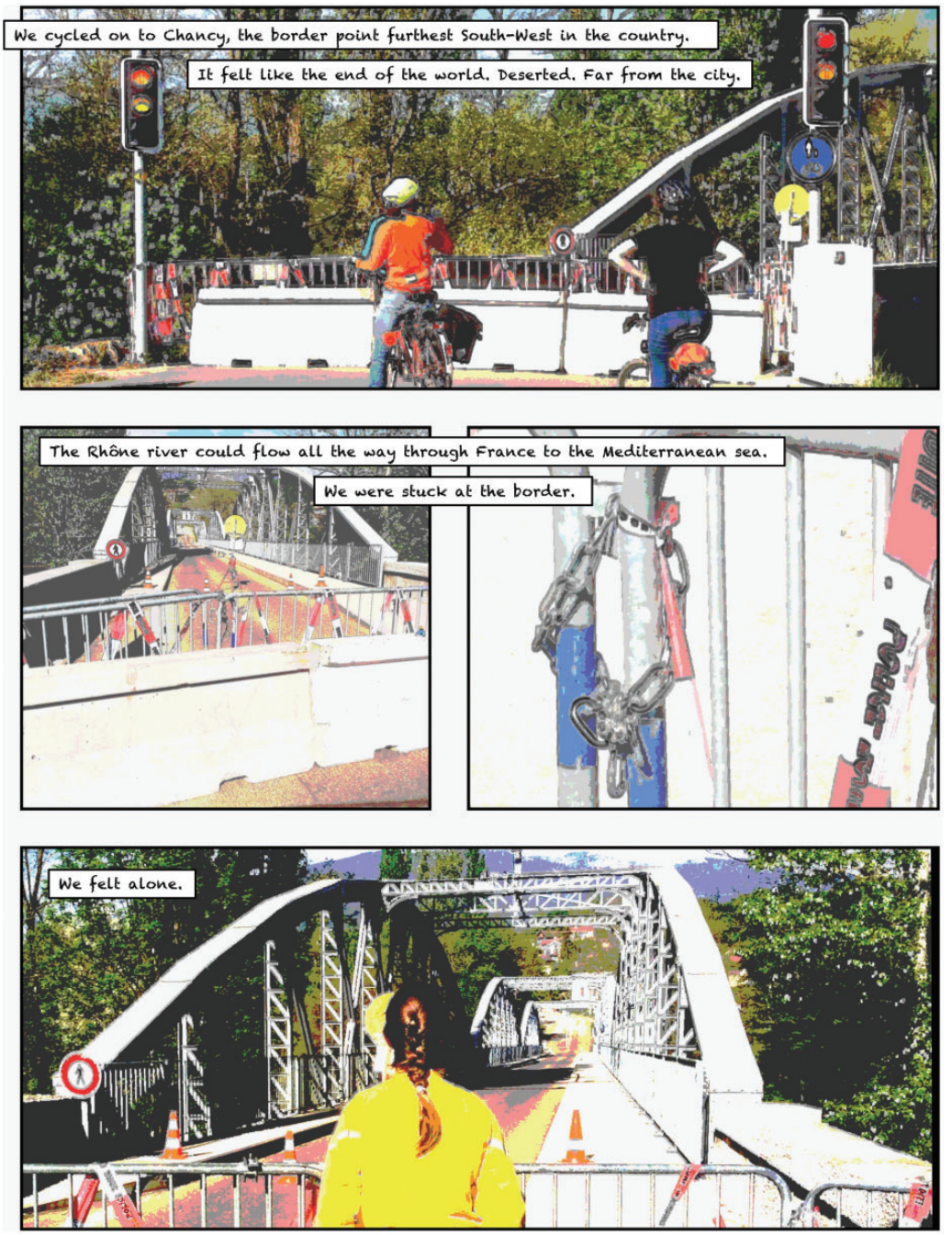

I am here. You are there. They can pass. You cannot.
Hierarchies were shaped and reinforced: who could pass, who was stuck, who was brought together?
In these newly-fenced places, people and things were separated and brought together, in new assemblages.
These fences created new relationships between people and with other objects.
"Inside us, you're safe", they seemed to say.
Did that French car belong to someone who worked in Switzerland and usually drove there? Was it parked there so that they could continue their journey by bus or by bike?
Were they essential enough to be allowed in?
We could follow new rules and distancing, but could they? Were they safe when they travelled and worked?
What happened to the owner of a little racoon? Were they able to return to pick it up?
People's lives and vulnerabilities were encoded in these new material forms, defining the terms of political possibility and political acts.

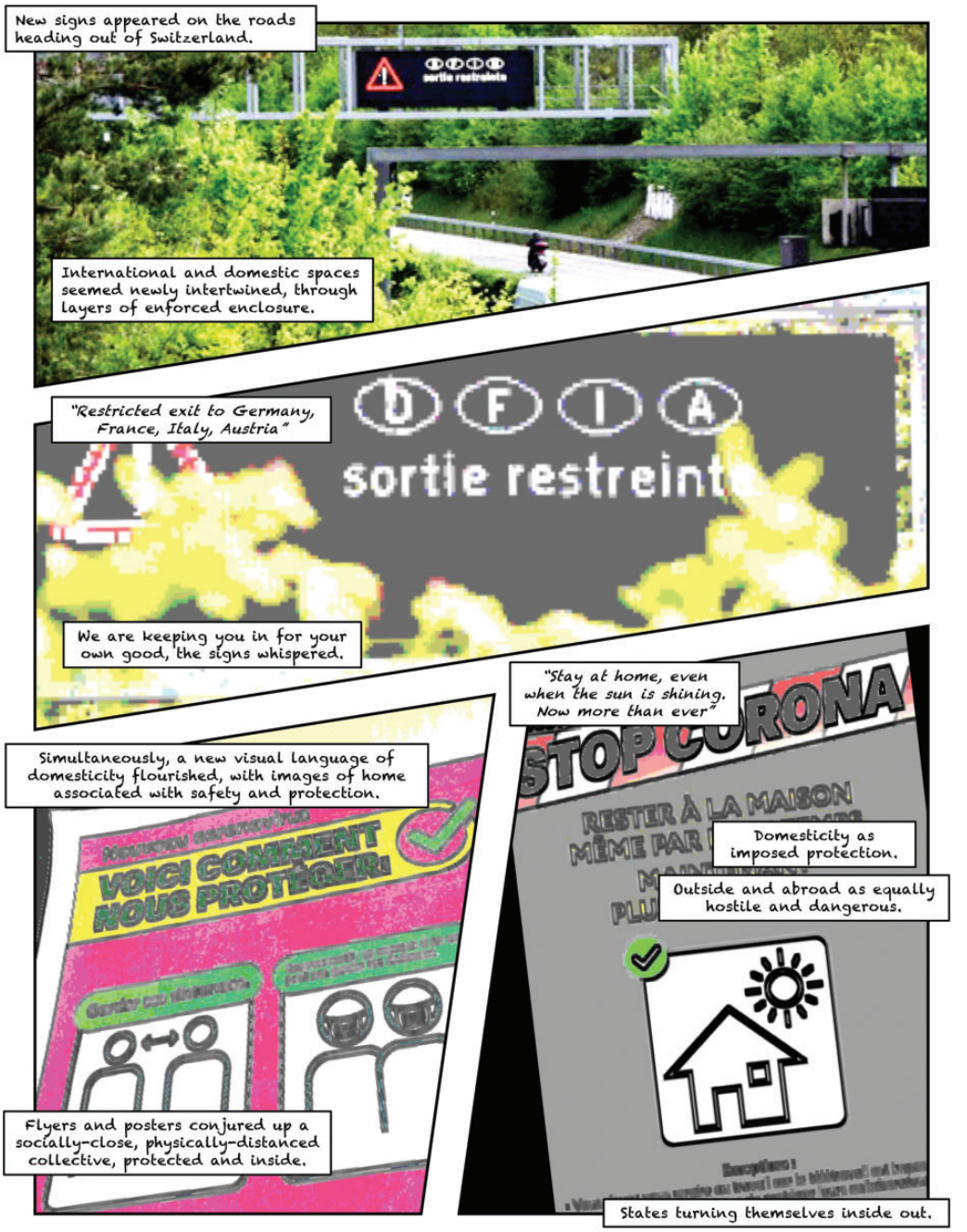

But because we were exploring our changed landscape as a family, it felt intimate.
It felt personal.
I couldn't consider it 'fieldwork' and try to be detached.
Feminists had long argued that understanding how the global and the local constitute each other requires questioning the *global intimate*.
Here, I was witnessing how this crisis was redefining security through and across these interwoven scales.
In Soral, the border line was marked in fading pink chalk. Perhaps a border guard hastily drew it before placing concrete blocks?
Maybe the border didn't really exist for them until they drew it?


As our cycling tours continued, I started to find the absurdity almost poetic.
In rural areas, authorities seemed to be trying to make the invisible border real.
Helpless and futile attempts to impose something.
Talismans against invisible enemies.

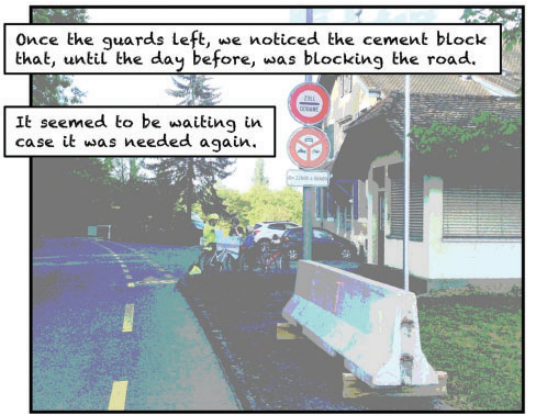
But in the city, it was militarized.
Like the early days of a divided Berlin, before the wall went up.
Ordonnance fédérale COVID 19 (mise en œuvre de canalisation du trafic frontalier).
Toute infraction est punissable selon l'art. 127 al. 2 LD.
No passing. No cycling. No walking. Bodies controlled.
Conscript soldiers mobilized for the first time since World War II.
Bored eighteen-year-olds fighting an ersatz war.


I tried to make sense of this disconnect between scales of security.
I realized that I needed to *domesticate* my thinking: to make sense of the ways in which the division between public and private was being inscribed and entangled on the political landscape.
The intimate bound up in the global.
To make sense of this, I needed to understand the division between domestic and public by looking at the performance of international politics in front of me.
As parents, we'd been trying to keep the children safe.
By erecting new borders, the patriarchal state was reminding me of how its protection reached from the intimate spaces of contagion to the international sphere.
This focus on entangled scales highlighted the significance of other supposedly non-political spaces and processes in the making of geopolitics, and in particular in the enforcement of borders and security.
How did care work allow you free passage?
How did some workers become 'essential'?
Why fight against a virus with a machine gun?


We cycled on to Chancy, the border point furthest South-West in the country.
It felt like the end of the world. Deserted. Far from the city.
The Rhône river could flow all the way through France to the Mediterranean sea.
We were stuck at the border.
We felt alone.


New signs appeared on the roads heading out of Switzerland.
International and domestic spaces seemed newly intertwined, through layers of enforced enclosure.
"Restricted exit to Germany, France, Italy, Austria"
D F I A
sortie restreint
We are keeping you in for your own good, the signs whispered.
Simultaneously, a new visual language of domesticity flourished, with images of home associated with safety and protection.
VOICI COMMENT NOUS PROTÉGER
Flyers and posters conjured up a socially-close, physically-distanced collective, protected and inside.
"Stay at home, even when the sun is shining. Now more than ever"
STOP CORONA
RESTER À LA MAISON
Domesticity as imposed protection.
Outside and abroad as equally hostile and dangerous.
States turning themselves inside out.

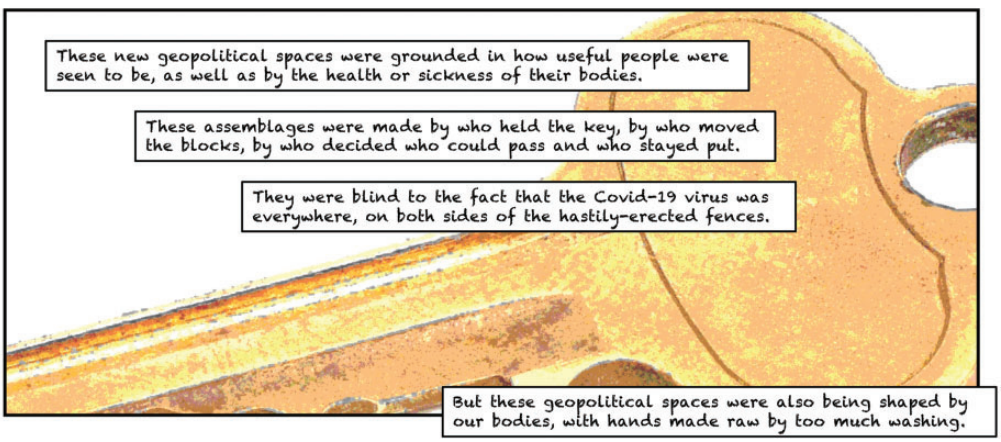
As the days passed, some border crossings started opening, often only allowing passage in one direction, at set times of the day.
Tribune de Genève | Mardi 21 avril 2020
État des douanes depuis le lundi 20 avril 2020
Douanes ouvertes 24 h / 24 avec voie prioritaire pour les bénéficiaires d'un macaron
Anières
Bardonnex Trafic commercial
Ferney-Voltaire
Thônex-Vallard Trafic commercial
Douanes ouvertes 24 h / 24 sans voie prioritaire
Meyrin
Perly
Moillesulaz
Ouvertes du lundi au vendredi, sauf jours fériés, de 6 h à 20 h
Veyrier
Mon-Idée
Ouvertes du lundi au vendredi, sauf jours fériés
Pour le trafic entrant en Suisse: de 6 h à 9 h
Pour le trafic sortant de Suisse: de 17 h à 19 h
Mategnin
Soral II
Monniaz
Veigy
Landecy
Ferney-Voltaire
Mategnin
Meyrin
The French population was still strictly confined, needing justifications & certificates to leave home.
But many workers lived across the border, and needed to come in and out of Switzerland every day.
Bodies, border posts, new laws, barriers opening and shutting, in new places, at specific time.
Different bodies were allowed more or less mobility across the border.
New and constantly shifting assemblages were co-constituting new politics of mobility and immobility, new spaces of security and insecurity.
One morning, we rushed to Soral to witness the closing of the border at 9am, after essential workers had been allowed through.
Engagement à la frontière
GARDE-FRONTIÈRE
As we arrived, out of breath, the lock had just been placed on the gate.
A car arrived, two minutes late.
It turned back.
The border guard smiled, perplexed by my request to photograph the moment.
He was just doing his job.
He held the key to the new padlock.
He was both state power and vulnerable worker.


Once the guards left, we noticed the cement block that, until the day before, was blocking the road.
It seemed to be waiting in case it was needed again.

We saw a face, hiding behind a curtain, watching us.
What did it feel like to live next to a border that opened and shut?
We didn't ask.

What did this cement block do before being moved here? Close roads to stop terrorist lorries from hitting crowds?
In the past years, we had quickly got used to new architectural shapes in cities. Blocks supposed to keep us safe.
Now it had become a talisman against a virus.

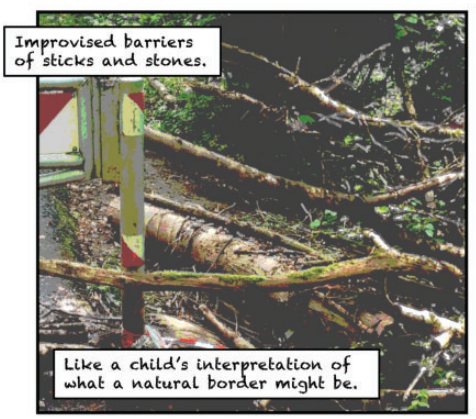
Our world was being shaped and remade by these borders opening and closing in particular spaces at particular times.

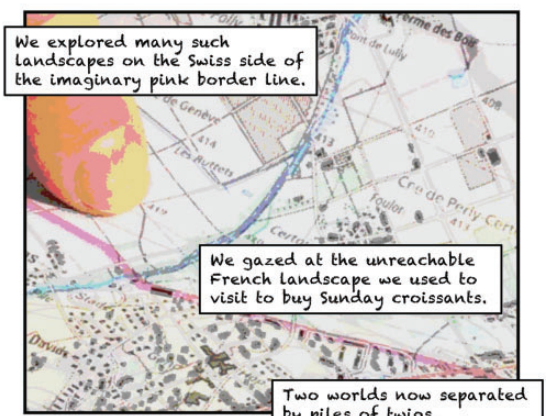

These new geopolitical spaces were grounded in how useful people were seen to be, as well as by the health or sickness of their bodies.
These assemblages were made by who held the key, by who moved the blocks, by who decided who could pass and who stayed put.
They were blind to the fact that the Covid-19 virus was everywhere, on both sides of the hastily-erected fences.
But these geopolitical spaces were also being shaped by our bodies, with hands made raw by too much washing.

Our children often built dens in the woods during family excursions to the mountains.
FERMETURE PROVISOIRE
Enrolling branches, sticks, moss to build a home.
Assembling their own refuges from an adult world.

The Swiss state was now doing the same.

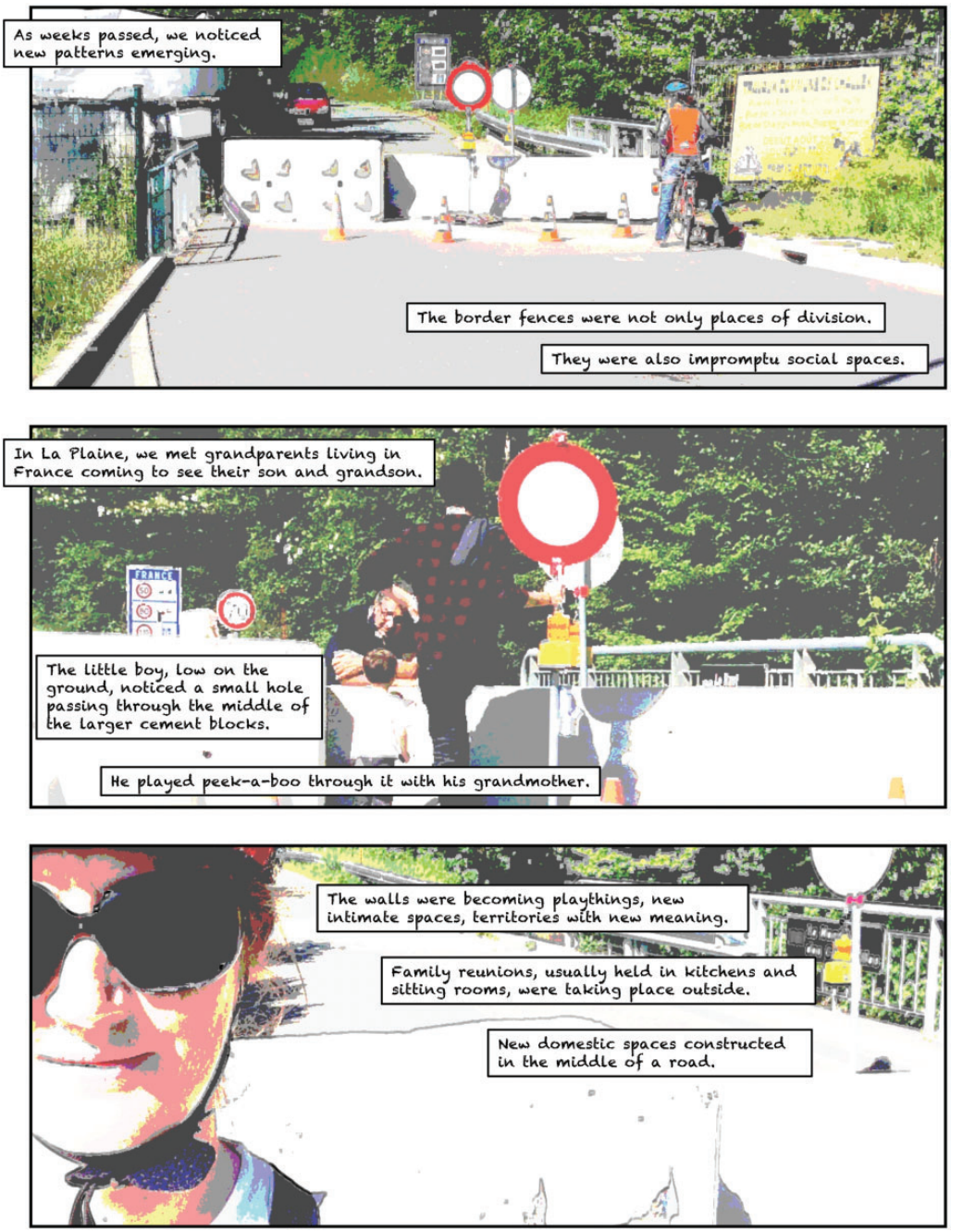
In Perly, we came across an odd border, assembled in haste, slowly rotting.
Gaps plugged with branches.


Improvised barriers of sticks and stones.
Like a child's interpretation of what a natural border might be.


We explored many such landscapes on the Swiss side of the imaginary pink border line.
We gazed at the unreachable French landscape we used to visit to buy Sunday croissants.
Two worlds now separated by piles of twigs.

One day, we met up with my father-in-law: the children's beloved Opa.
No hugs. No touching. Socially-distanced cycling.
He'd lived all his life in Geneva. His intimate knowledge of the landscape had always guided us through secret bike paths and wooded lanes.
He knew every corner of Geneva, and every mountain beyond.
FERMETURE PROVISOIRE
But even he didn't have the keys to the new padlocks.
Le journal malin de Genève
Plus rien ne sera comme avant!
It did feel as if nothing would ever be the same again.

Near Nernier, we started to notice small transgressions.
A dog.
I greeted him like a long-lost friend from another world.
Maybe his owner was responsible for the tire marks passing around the blocks, flattening the grass?
Poetic transgressions.
Only later did I notice the dog's pin-chipped collar.
His movements, like ours, were being monitored.


As weeks passed, we noticed new patterns emerging.
The border fences were not only places of division.
They were also impromptu social spaces.
In La Plaine, we met grandparents living in France coming to see their son and grandson.
FRANCE
The little boy, low on the ground, noticed a small hole passing through the middle of the larger cement blocks.
He played peek-a-boo through it with his grandmother.
The walls were becoming playthings, new intimate spaces, territories with new meaning.
Family reunions, usually held in kitchens and sitting rooms, were taking place outside.
New domestic spaces constructed in the middle of a road.

There were welcome signs that the borders might be reopening this summer.
In some places, blocks had been moved. Rainbows drawn in chalk were fading.
In hospitals, less people were dying.
Our bodies were getting stronger from all the cycling.
Our skin was getting used to endless scrubbing.
The geopolitical landscape was continuing to change. Sovereignty marked in chalk, wire, tape, branches and concrete was reshaping collectives.
I felt infinitely safer now that the borders seemed to be slowly softening.
End. 10th May 2020

Endnotes:

1. Luck and privilege: privilege plays out in multiple ways in allowing us to move around on our bicycles s in this context, including in terms of place of residence, age, ability, class, race, professional situation as well as national and cantonal confinement policies. During all our weekend touring & photography, we were only questioned once by mobile border patrols.
2. Schengen Area: The Schengen Area guarantees free movement to persons legally present within signatory countries, including Switzerland (a non-European Union country). Switzerland temporarily reintroduced border controls on the 14 May 2020 because of Coronavirus COVID-19.
3. Fall, J. J. (2020). Territory, sovereignty and entitlement: Diplomatic discourses in the United Nations Security Council. Political Geography, 81, 102208.
4. Fall, J. J. (2010). Artificial states? On the enduring geographical myth of natural borders. Political Geography, 29(3), 140–147.
5. Minca, C., Crampton, J.W. Bryan, J. Fall, J.J. Murphy, A.B., Paasi, A. Elden, S. 2015 Reading Stuart Elden's The Birth of Territory, Political Geography, 46 93–101

These **readings** helped shape my thinking while putting this together:
Bleiker, R. (2019). "Visual autoethnography and international security: Insights from the Korean DMZ". European Journal of International Security, 4(3), 274–299.
Dixon, D. (2015). Feminist Geopolitics: Material States. Farnham, Ashgate.
Dowler, L. and J. Sharp (2001). "A feminist geopolitics?" Space and Polity 5(3): 165–176.
Jackman, A., et al. (2020). "Unearthing feminist territories and terrains." Political Geography 20: online.
Mountz, A. and Hyndman, J. (2006) "Feminist approaches to the global intimate" Women's Studies Quarterly 34(1/2) 446–460.
Sharp, J. (2020). "Materials, forensics and feminist geopolitics." Progress in Human Geography: 1–13.

Ethics: consent has been obtained from all people who are recognizable in these images.