

2020

Momenta Vita

Jayna Brown and Neferti X. M. Tadiar

2020. The year 2020 lunged ahead, each day revealing more and more drastic and catastrophic events. These were not new catastrophes; in fact they were all too familiar, to some people more than others. But they piled on one another with a violent rapidity and on a horrific scale and scope. All was laid bare, and the structures and practices that created the conditions for their eruption were brought into stark relief. We were seeing the final destruction of the world: pestilence, rapacious late-stage capitalism, climate crisis and mass extinction, authoritarianism, militarily armed police states, and white supremacists—compounding phenomena that have left little doubt the end is nigh.

The year began with the spread of COVID-19, as it was first called, identified, and cautioned against as early as December of 2019, and officially declared a global pandemic in March. Quarantining measures across the globe led to an extreme confinement for many already isolated elders and the immunocompromised, and to a severe economic stoppage and physical lockdown affecting the informal livelihoods that sustain most of the global South. It led to deep isolation for many people in the global North, the shelter-in-place classes who are confined to computer screens, hair growing long or cut in strange forms. It led to a terrifying exposure for health-care workers and other service workers, dubbed “essential workers,” whose jobs, already precarious in many cases, also became dangerous. It led to a growing class of unemployed, as businesses shuttered and failed. In a condition all of us supposedly share, we are actually more and more separated. Fault lines around class and race deepen, are reshaped and recalibrated. The fraught nature of our social landscape is an aggressive hardening of inequalities: we exist in a plurality of worlds.

But this reckoning was met with rage and refusal. One too many—mid-May George Floyd called out to his mama as the man strapped with a gun, police officer Derek Chauvin, knelt on his neck. For whatever reason this was the one the world saw, and people broke their isolation over the summer to flood streets, roads, and fields across the world in the largest protest movement in history. Or movements—people came to situate Floyd’s violent death in the wide, deep context of intertwined systems and institutions of oppression. Young people were and still are furious and will not tolerate compromises, concessions, partial gains, or reforms. They are inheriting a shit show, a world for which there is no future. But rather than some nihilist apathy or fatalism, the ethos of the 2020 protests was one of envisioning and creating. Protesters across the globe call for complete change, holistic in the true sense: they call for the destruction of imperialism, capitalism, and patriarchy; they call for an end to carceral formations of all kinds, the relentless persecutions and killings and the impunity that make them possible; they call for justice not just repair; they speak of abolition, the return of stolen lands, food and health care for all; they build forms of mutual aid and creative kinship, claim new genders and the end of gender itself. We’ve reached the end of the world, so what can we create in its place? they ask.

The monsoon season hit and seemed to depart. Fall and winter settled in. In the United States reactionaries continue to rise up with fascist desire, following every obscene utterance of an oligarchical right wing. Those who believed the United States was a democracy were frightened, and the margin of electoral victory against Trump and Trumpism seemed too slim for comfort. Vaccines were approved but remained frustratingly unavailable to most. While hoarded in the West, particularly English-speaking nations, they still remain unevenly distributed. In Brazil, people were dying at the hospital doors. In the Philippines, before the official vaccine program was rolled out top generals got their shots. In Israel, while 50 percent of the population had received at least one shot of the vaccine, in the occupied territories few Palestinians had received any. The richest men in history were (are) crushing unions and planning their escape to Mars. Everyone else is exhausted. January 2021 and people wanted some peace.

But “peace” may not be what we really need, we thought. We don’t need to restore normalcy. Instead we felt the need to keep alive a sense of alarm, immediacy, and rage. Apocalypse breaks open portals, granting the possibility for new paradigms for life to arise and for suppressed and obscured practices to flourish. A rush to restore would occlude the creativity and searing clarity of the moment, and things could disappear in the act of “recovery.” None of us want it to go back to how it was but to keep the space open for change. While planning it, we hoped this issue

could serve as some kind of gathering of momenta, reminders of what was happening for people personally and politically in 2020. We offer a collection of impressions, some traces of the ephemeral that we hope will carry some of the transformative energies and moving forces of these times.

In the midst of world historical events, the quotidian takes on a deep significance. As we put this issue together, what emerged from the contributions was the poly-temporal quality of time, both its durational nature and its volatility. Alarm became monotonous, the news (should we watch? avoid? believe?) was like the ambulance sirens that blared all day. It became even more apparent that everything is ephemeral; we felt caught in a continuing, virtual swirl of yesterday's headlines. Yet each day brought another staccato burst of fresh hells, which exploded above our heads. We recalled missing the train ride, the haircut, the casual hello to acquaintances on the street, settling into a seat at the movie theater, the easy intimacies of old friends, kin, and strangers. Coming at us in a relentless pace were killings, protests, backlash, heightened policing and militarist crackdowns, and would-be coups (this was before the fires and floods of 2021). We might have felt we were in the midst of a revolution, but many also felt strangely paralyzed by the sheer depth and breadth of the convulsions. Many felt frustratingly far away, like those who had retreated from the cities into the quiet of the woods or those who were stuck wherever they had happened to be visiting during the lockdowns of a year ago because of strict prohibitions on domestic and international travel.

And yet many people also continued to take to the streets, mostly masked and distanced, but nonetheless intrepid with grievous fury at the tyranny and terrorism of their authoritarian states, laid bare and intensified in the time of emergency. Protest became the quotidian: as well as the well-publicized massive Black Lives Matter protests in the United States, people in India began taking part in the biggest farmers' protests that perhaps the world has ever seen. There were hunger protests against city lockdown in Santiago, Chile, rent strikes in the United Kingdom, demonstrations against de facto authoritarian rule and state terrorism in the Philippines, and protests against police brutality and killings in Nigeria (#EndSARS). No doubt by the time this issue is in print everything (or perhaps nothing) will have changed. But one thing we do know.

Nothing is over.

The Issue

As we planned this issue, we were well aware that the conditions we face are long-standing, that no immediate answer would ever be adequate. No easy narrative or analytic can be held or made permanent. Although deep, large-scale, systemic changes must be demanded, we were not inter-

ested in master plans; we don't even think they are possible. Instead we wanted to listen to the immediacy of the moment, for the most guttural of responses may be the most useful. We wanted to dwell in moments of opening and reflection in the midst of disaster, moments to hold on to beyond the continuous turmoil of an endless present emergency.

In putting together this issue, we agreed that it was key to try and capture the breakdown happening around us at the time. Breakdown, as in the section of a tune where the melody is stripped away and we are left with the beat, may be the perfect metaphor for what we seek. What kind of pulse, rhythm, can we build on together? To archive in this way offers us the chance to see and remember the range of innovative and affective responses to this time. We wanted to collect and record how people were reacting to the welter of events taking place as they did in the now: the fearful days of quarantine, the bleakness of isolation and mass death, as well as the beautiful destruction and dismantling, the tearing down of statues and the tattooing of monuments. Our hope, however utopian, was that all of this could shift and tilt the world in new directions.

We wanted the issue to acknowledge the end times we find ourselves in, not as a solemn assemblage of academic papers but as an unruly and hybrid gathering of responses. We wanted to avoid authoritative assessments, punditry, and predictive speculation; we didn't want prescriptives to the present. We also wanted to avoid reciting the endless details of suffering, the crisis porn, found in so much of the news. We wanted to hear about the immediate and quotidian, but we also wanted this issue to have a shelf life and to be a record we could keep.

In making a record of what might be the passing times of the present, it is not surprising that the now is shot through with memories, some that come as flashpoints of return, others that linger as abiding or haunting companions from other times. We wanted to dwell in the moments of opening in this time, only to find that other times were dwelling in them too. The poly-temporal quality of our reflections is echoed in the poly-spatial reach of their reverberations.

We were heartened by the range of responses, particularly their regional and geographical breadth. We wanted to resist the pull of a US-centric framing of the moment, and this volume contains reports from India, South Africa, the Philippines, Singapore, Peru, the United Kingdom. It also contains pieces from perspectives that are not recognizable by existing nation-states. We weren't sure what structure it would all take, but as we reached out, the issue began to form into what we started calling "pods"; the scholars, activists, and artists we approached gathered friends and colleagues and asked for short pieces, reflections, or reactions to our times. The issue's backbone comprises six pods, each with an organizer. Consisting of between four and ten short pieces, the pods have each been

curated with a distinct focus as well as range of motion. In addition the issue has one interview, two photo collections with short essays, and one stand-alone piece. We hope that loosening up our grip on academic form for a moment may give us permission to connect in alternative ways, to gather our thoughts and words without having to make concessions to professional requirements. We hope that these pieces speak to each other and have the capacity to reverberate into a new paradigm for living amid the chaos and rubble that is our world.

Jayna Brown is coeditor of *Social Text* and professor of media studies at Pratt Institute. Brown is the author of two books: *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (2008) and *Black Utopias: Speculative Life and the Music of Other Worlds* (2021).

Neferti X. M. Tadiar is professor of women's, gender, and sexuality studies at Barnard College, Columbia University. She is the author of *Things Fall Away: Philippine Historical Experience and the Makings of Globalization* (2009) and *Fantasy-Production: Sexual Economies and Other Philippine Consequences in the New World Order* (2004). Her new book *Remaindered Life* will appear in 2022.