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#NoGoingBack: Queer leaps at the intersection of protest and COVID-19

ABSTRACT

The concurrency of quarantine and protest has highlighted the trappings of a modernist realism whose conservative solutions reveal a paucity of methods and dreams. The wins that the uprisings against anti-Black police violence have put on the horizon, from the dismantling of carceral institutions to the uplifting of alternatives, have been long seeded by social movements that demanded the impossible. This includes ancestors, many of whom Black, queer and abolitionist, who prepared to take fantastic leaps, in the words of the Combahee River Collective. The following meditation holds up this legacy in order to reckon with the racism accompanying this latest crisis, from the Orientalist origin story of the coronavirus to a global quarantine paradigm that is haunted by racial capitalism. At the dystopic crossroad of the pandemic and the uprisings, a multiracial and multi-species spectre of planetary interdependence appears. This is illustrated by a mutual aid movement that uses digital and offline tactics in order to norm beyond the normal. In the place of a state-led surveillance and a single-issue environmentalism that are hostile to those most vulnerable to the virus, an urban environmental justice becomes palpable whose methods are queer.

KEYWORDS

queers of colour
subversive quarantine
prison abolition
speculation
biopolitics/necropolitics
environmental justice

1. George Floyd is not the only Black or Indigenous person who died at the hands of police. The list of names is overwhelming and includes Tony McDade, Regis Korchinski-Paquet, Chantel Moore, Oury Jalloh and Christy Schwundek and too many other cis-men, cis-women and transpeople worldwide.
2. The following thoughts were cross-fertilized by many. I have been inspired by the words and actions of many fellow queer/BIPOC/migrant activist scholars during this time, such as Paola Bacchetta, Gunjan Chopra, Kusha Dadui, Sedina Fiati, Audrey Huntley, Ren-Yo Hwang, Andrew Jolivet, Adi Kuntsman, Margo Okazawa-Rey, Ana Clarisa Rojas Durazo, Amita Swadhin and Vanessa Thompson.

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I write into the snapshot of a world that has gone from frozen to on fire. The police murder of George Floyd has sparked mass protests all over the United States and in cities across the West.¹ This is happening during a hyper-surveilled pandemic and despite risks of infection and arrest. To a growing critical mass, the fire that is currently lighting up the police headquarters in Minneapolis symbolizes an awareness that state racism is not over. Nor is it irreversible: As we now learn, police forces recently armed with total powers in the name of quarantine can be defunded.

The time we are in has an unhinged feel to it. It is both haunted and prescient (Gordon 2011). On the one hand, the monster keeps coming back with a new spin – from the virus’s ability to shut down all major organs, to the worst recession in centuries, to the children now deemed especially symptomatic. On the other hand, significant change is within reach that even a few weeks ago did not seem possible. At the time of writing, city councils, universities, school boards and unions in Minneapolis and elsewhere are having serious debates whether it is time to dismantle the prison industrial complex, promising to propel us further towards an urban environmental justice that has space for all.

In this article, I resist the pull to snap back into reality and into a normal state, as constantly referenced in politicians’ calls to go ‘back to normal’ and journalists’ investigations of the ‘new normal’. In this, I follow a demand of the mutual aid movement that is mushrooming around us (e.g., Spade 2020), using both digital and offline methods to step in as markets and states fall apart: #NoGoingBack. As I take the leap to the other side of the pandemic portal, with a body that is marked by both privilege and oppression, I am surrendering to the fantastical feel of this era, which we may remember as COVID-19, abolition or yet another forgettable chapter in what Vergès (2017) called the racial Anthropocene. My meditation touches on the ghostly hauntings of institutions that have long upheld our normal but are currently dropping their facades. It proceeds to feel its way into the symbolic and material terrain of the virus, which I envision as a multiracial, multi-species environment. It then surrenders to a dystopic landscape that places the contestation over what is conceivable squarely in the realm of the fantastical (Brown and Imarisha 2015; Haritaworn et al. 2018). While some of this has taken place digitally, I conclude that the struggle for other realities, which occurs on multiple scales, including inner cities, ancestral territories and queer of colour bodies, is necessarily a multi-method project. In fantasizing our way out of this mess, we have at our disposal a radical collective imagination, fertilized by decades of queer Black, Indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC) art, activism and writing, where the lines between organizing, fiction and speculation are intentionally blurred.²

GHOSTLY ARCHITECTURES

Alongside the noisy mediations, of riots and openings, there is a crumbling, of institutions that have long acted as guardians of how we should live. From the impossibility of getting an appointment at city hall, to the closing of national

and regional borders to even the most privileged, the fragile solidarities of nation, Europe and West are fraying. As often when faced with disasters, the neo-liberal state is failing, more noticeably now, creating a vacuum for alternative solidarities (Rodriguez et al. 2020).

The traps of the old normal are especially obvious when regarding the necropolitical institutions (Mbembe 2003), such as police, prisons, reservations, psychiatric institutions, refugee camps and homeless shelters, whose blueprints spread across the globe with that older pandemic, of European expansion. These hauntings loudly accompany the governance of COVID-19. They start with the racializing logics of quarantine, as evidenced by politicians' attempts to criminalize resistance and stigmatize protesters for supposedly spreading the virus. The civil war declared on Black youth risking their lives during a public health crisis contrasts starkly with the tolerance displayed towards White people wilfully breaking quarantine – from para-militarized vigilantes and libertarians demanding haircuts in the United States to German left- and right-wing conspiracy theorists, to White Torontonians picnicking alongside their mayor in the park.

From the start, quarantine has been a racial profiling project, as in the police assault against Ramatoulaye B., a young mother in France buying milk for her baby, allegedly without producing a print-out detailing her trajectory. If, as Foucault (2003) argued, society must be defended, the mechanism of 'protection' – from print-outs to phone apps to immunity passports – repeats the spatial control of colonial pass laws, which hails racialized bodies as always at the wrong place and time. The distinction between the properly alive and the walking dead is executed along familiar lines.

The current wave of police racism has the virus as its sidekick. As protesters spite the risks and take to the streets, the pandemic is weaponized against them. Several have highlighted the targeting of the breath, during an epidemic that shuts down the lungs and against a Movement for Black Lives whose slogan is *I can't breathe* – from active strangulation to teargas and other cough-inducing chemical warfare, to confining thousands in prisons where COVID has soared. Belying liberal shock, abolitionists have long argued that 'it's not police brutality' (Rodriguez 2017) – that violence is at the root of a carceral regime that is not broken but was built this way.

This also holds true for the biopolitical institutions, often associated with the caring arms of the welfare state. With the lockdown, the service functions of the state and the non-profit sector, decimated by neoliberalism, further dwindled (e.g., CATIE 2020). But even as governments are 're-opening', the institutions designed for the properly alive, from schools to daycares, reappear as health hazards.

Hospitals and nursing homes have become especially shock worthy as sites of 'premature death' (Gilmore 2007). Resisting their fetishistic glorification, hospital workers have drawn attention to conditions of work and care that foster some for life while leaving others to die, on both sides of the carer/cared for divide (Das Gupta 2020). The deaths of hospital workers and elders, and the resuscitation of triage from the medical history books (Ignani et al. 2020), have manifested the 'monster' of neo-liberal defunding (Davis 2020) and clarified the longevity of a eugenicism that renders non-White lives, particularly those who are trans and/or disabled, vulnerable and *a priori* low priority.

Then there are the forgotten places, now rediscovered as 'corona hotspots', where poor people of colour are reduced to their labour power, and conditions of working, living and quarantining already resemble prison: The social

housing blocks. The Amazon, Instacart and Whole Foods warehouses. The fruit and vegetable farms. The meat plants, where humans and animals are herded and encamped alongside each other. The fencing away of these places, through quarantine, zoning or other means, has long constituted normality.

Across these institutions, the difference between those that safeguard, and those that abandon or take life, is increasingly rhetorical. As everyday acts are resignified as lethal, there is an uncanny doubling of how things appear, widening the chips in the consensus over what is normal. In this gap arises 'a permanent readiness for the Marvelous', as Afrosurrealist Suzanne Césaire once stated (Kelley 1999).

FANTASTICAL CREATURES

There is a supernatural feel to the virus. Like most tales of contagion, its setting is non-White (Shah 2001). From Trump's 'China-virus' to Bryan Adams' tirade against 'bat eating, wet market animal selling, virus making greedy bastards', to the huddle of vampire bats on the cover of the left-wing publication *Sopa de Wuhan*, the virus' origin story conjures a demonic, perversely capitalistic Orient (Amadeo 2020; Beaumont-Thomas 2020). There, race and species, human and inhuman, modern and premodern inter-breed with impropriety, a trope as old as European racism. The bat features a victim-villain whose vengeance is misplaced onto the 'wrong' humans, who do not inappropriately consume animals or encroach on wildlife. Yet even on the other side of the world, the enlightened 'we' is not safe from the curse, which spreads at the speed of light, or of air travel.

This multi-species narrative of Man and his Others, as Sylvia Wynter calls it (McKittrick 2015), could only be conceived in a *racial* Anthropocene. To name racism as the apocalypse is to let go of a universe created by an absolutist deity, be it God or an eco-feminist Earth, whose concept of 'nature' means to inhabit or cohabit with the right/White genders and species. As environmental justice activists have long argued, the fantasy of pristine landscapes freed of humans lends itself to an eco-fascist imaginary (Brown 2020; Gosine and Teelucksingh 2008). In this greenwashed variation on White supremacy, nature recovers by ridding itself of humans, but never all equally. In contrast, the ones who show up in the statistics for social and premature death are not the biggest polluters. They are old, sick, poor, disabled, Brown and Black. Their intimacies are criminal, their families too big. Their territories are in the way of 'essential' industries. They are the same ones who have long been deemed disposable.

In the place of this misanthropic universe is a multiplicity of environments that include humans, and cities. Here, catastrophe precedes the apocalyptic event, from melting ice caps to droughts, floods, storms and fires. It precedes disaster capitalism, even. The horror that is 'racial capitalism' (Robinson 1983), which tops the causes of premature death for Man's Others, is contemporaneous with the violent incorporation of all into modernity.

MARVELLOUS LEAPS

The dystopic space that is opening up on the crossroads of COVID and protest nevertheless births new possibilities for existing with other human and non-human beings. Many are rediscovering the speculative landscapes of Octavia Butler, whose *Parable of the Sower* is set in a 2020s not unlike our own – one marred by fascist government and abandonment (Brown and Imarisha 2015).

The novel summons the potential for change, a change that is spiritual, and recited as a recurring prayer by its heroine, a multiracial Black woman, and her pod of outcasts, who are literally reaching for the stars. There is a long line of writers like Butler, who encourage us to embrace the fantastical in order to shed the forms that never served us and create space for the purposeful dreaming that is needed to escape the intolerable present.

In taking this current leap, we invite possession by feisty queer ancestors who embraced abnormal and chose connection over isolation. We remember lessons from the Aids crisis – that safer socialities are attractive and that fluid-bonded pods are part of a heritage that comforts us in the face of collective devastation. In this legacy, we rediscover quarantining as a methodology of care – of pleasure even.

Our pods, bubbles and care collectives, however officially mis-appropriated, are radical alternatives to state-led lockdown. Our masks are defiant fashion symbols, of ethnic pride, of solidarity, of survivors' genius (Haritaworn 2020). These subversive performances of quarantine divest from a state-led quarantine regime that deals more death. Their role models are disabled queers of colour (Mingus 2016). They are disciples of movements for prison abolition and transformative justice, which again seize the moment to create safety and accountability outside of the system. They step into a long legacy of mutual aid by BIPOC looking after each other while the state is nowhere to be found.

As we reject old and new versions of the 'normal', we seize the moment to norm, in whatever medium is available. The digital environments that increasingly absorb our waking energy are full of violence, but they are also populated by repertoires that rehearse other worlds. By visions of uprisings. By acts of solidarity that model possibilities beyond the anti-Blackness that has infected non-Black communities. Like the owners of the Gandhi Mahal restaurant in Minneapolis, damaged during the uprising, whose post affirming that #BlackLivesMatter, by any means necessary, went viral. Or the K-pop fans breaking Dallas Police Department's snitching app with fancam shots of Korean popstars. The TikTok users emptying out Trump's Tulsa rally with fake seat reservations. And the mutual aid groups using digital methods to re-distribute real-life wealth and practice communication skills in the most unlikely of media, rehearsing communities that are capacious enough to resist fascism.

The two Toronto-based mutual aid groups that inspired my title are not incidentally led by BIPOC women and queers who bring their backgrounds in arts, anti-violence, racial, economic and healing justice, harm reduction and Indigenous feminism. One is called CareMongering, a name that consciously norms for solidarity rather than fearmongering, also reflected in organizers' calls for physical rather than social distancing. The other, Toronto/Tkaronto Mutual Aid is an offshoot of CareMongering and elaborates this vision through a comprehensive set of demands: 'decolonization, healthcare for all, no work obligations, meet basic needs and solidarity not policing', including 'NO to border controls'. Both are on Facebook³ but broker offline resources, including masks and safety alerts for demonstrators, and engage in struggles impacting offline worlds, e.g. rent strikes and police defunding.

To recognize the potential of these digital environments for generating spiritual fuel and people power is not to glorify the digital over 'real life'. As digital and media scholars have long shown, the two are inter-connected. There are equal dangers in relying on a digital realm controlled by capital and surveilled by the state, and in eco-fascist yearning for more 'natural' states. We need an urban environmental justice that is neither technophobic nor punitive

3. Currently available at: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/TO.Community.Response.COVID19/>
<https://www.facebook.com/mutualaid.to/>.
Accessed 1 June 2020.

of those taking back public space. Where we nurture safer ways of leaving the privatized moulds that capitalism has designed for us, as visionary cyborgs or as bodies that engage in the necessary risk of commingling. Where our children grow up loving bats and people *and* learning to share space as interdependent earthlings. Where our youth teach us how to take down drones and hate pages *and* grow foods that withstand droughts. As this moment reminds us, our methods must be as queerly expansive as our dreams. They require us to be both safe and promiscuous.

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