

# No Demos in the Pandemic

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**Abstract:** That the present moment ties multiple crises together — not least because each is a future of pasts that wound(ed) through each other — must be factored into our intercessions and visions. If every crisis is also a call to order, then what order, old or new, does the pandemic call us to? Its literality provokes us to keep both the *pan* and the *demos* in sight, just as they are being extinguished through borders, disease, poverty, insecurity, hatred, and disposability in the global postcolony. We are asked to remember that capital and colony are inseparable, that the nation-state is too suspicious a source of comfort, that the eroding claims of citizenship across the postcolonial and post-democratic fascist failed states are instructive and prophetic, and that the assumptions of place and movement in our frames of the democratic political need revisiting.

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“Karachi is not Paris, and Aceh is no Lisbon,” I wrote fifteen years ago. Asked to contribute to a special issue on the tsunami in Indonesia, I compared how the Karachi bourgeois responded to Aceh with what went on in Paris in response to the Lisbon earthquake. I wrote about the mapping of disaster being inseparable from the history of the maps of damage, and of these maps as stories of proximity and disposability — of austerity as the demand, and abundance as the ability, to suffer. I wrote about which disasters are named and which go unnamed, where they become real crises of post-colonial neoliberalism and where they remain ad hoc disasters invoked, as need arises, for a presumptive new life for a dying order. That the many Acehs of our lives put together will never a Lisbon make is not just a complaint but also an admonition and a plea: admonition that we must stop wasting time on the questions of evil and fate as if the god of Lisbon had anything to do with the god of Aceh; and plea that we, who have always known how to grieve better and more consistently than our murderers, take a chance on each other and decolonize our complaints while we do so.

Why not seize the moment and call the bloody bluff of capital and colony in crisis, always needing resuscitation, seeing the disasters worthy of naming, Lisbon and Auschwitz for example, not as exceptions to the



story of modernity as someone like Susan Neiman would want, but as plot points in the becoming and planned obsolescence of the crises and wars that constitute and nourish capital and colony? The current order (prefigured in each preceding grand crisis and its remedy) is rife with the curse of failed statehood, lower yield per human life, more disposable humans per dollar, etc., as necessary extractions that enable life in those other places that are only just steps behind in killing their “own” people. While I am one of those who feel that it is always already too late, if we were to have any chance at undoing any of this and doing it over, it is bound to be lost if we do not truly imbibe two key lessons.

One, that these prophecies have always been projections, outward from the heart of white supremacist settler-colonial capitalism. This is abundantly clear with a quick look at the current state of the US: pathetically following over a century of multiple postwar and at least two post-colonial reconstructions of its own statehood with this shameful failure to either do good by its own people or anyone else in the world; never accepting how its own constitutive traumas continuously suffuse lives it does not count as its own; and swiftly moving in the direction of citizenship by abandonment and elimination, even of those it did once count as its own. (The preposterous inability even of the US left to grasp the state’s political pathologies this way is only a reflection of their own, as we are made to swallow all their questions and all their answers, and take marching orders when they yell crisis – as if there are none others left, or as if there were never any others to begin with.) It is in this historical context of no expectations and constant betrayals that Bernie Sanders’ campaign (which ended just as we were asked to shelter-in-place) presented even a slight twinkle of a future, an internationalist one at that, only because of how his victory on some fronts might help release the chokehold on the grievous hopes and dreams of our worlds. We still called that campaign ours, never quite expecting our worlds to be theirs to fight for. And it was still okay, and the right thing to do, for the sake of every life, home, city, country, and possibility that does not exist because of what the US has and has not done, within and beyond its borders.

Two, that the entire world is a postcolony, and requires epistemological and institutional frames that fully imbibe that. By this, I mean that our global political order – and even its contemporary neoliberalisms and fascisms that are often allotted different fashionable path-dependencies that are said to have far surpassed the old colonial question – have emerged from colonial and supremacist epistemic, ontological, psychic, and institutional imperatives. What binds us are not impotent global institutions that were never meant to work; the only shared reality, for those who want to confront it, is the fraught and not-quite-*after*life of

colonialism, slavery, and white supremacy, which are all *still* necessary to, and operative in, every destination chosen for capitalism's ravages and crises that roll out on flattened terrain of the market that has taken a lot of bombs, batons, bulldozers, and epidemics to level.

So, in order to assemble my frame for this crisis, I cannot help but write from within this knot, of the pandemic and of political annihilation, and of the migrant fugues that make it impossible to think about place as a guarantor of being. A migrant who might count as a worker and citizen in more than one place, but probably never as any place's own dead. In this particular forced ethics of ambiguity, everything is always present and absent – and the tiny grace of working “from home” is being spared having to be physically present to see our labor die and see the body disappeared, an experience as real in the imperialist post/settler/colony as in the non-imperialist one. I have not understood yet why people being inside their homes makes them quieter around here – it certainly would not be so if I were still in Karachi. Is this the phenomenology of the contained not-yet-symptomatic body – or is it the phenomenology of a failed idea of shelter, or home, or place – that it coil ups, refusing to fill up space, or takes the distance so seriously that doesn't even will voice to scale it? Perhaps unsure and afraid who might be addressed, and who may never respond? It is not like we have been evacuated or sent to dig underground like in any of Amir Nizar Zuabi's or Larissa Sansour's imaginings of Palestine. A politics of this moment requires us to remember and narrate *now*, rather than after the proverbial dusk, our unlocated selves that have been forced to accede to an idea of locatedness that is bound to betray if it has not already. In doing so, we determine whom we grieve for and whom we bury, which crisis calls we heed as calls to which order, what questions we will even dignify, which cases we will no longer make, which starting points we will no longer entertain even for a little bit, whom we will refuse to hand over, and whether our prayers for the dead will be an appeal, or a complaint, or a call to arms.

There is no doubt that, after a long time, at least in the lives of those who are not stateless, the nation-state seems to matter and some fellow humans seem to be on a rebound love affair with it, and with its functionaries. In this moment of either feeling coddled by the nation-state (those who have it and where it works), or feeling worried about the threat of deglobalization that might darken even our illusory visions of open borders, it is important not to fall for the liberal state whose logic of securing some still cannot come without sacrificing others, and who will never betray capital. When it comes to the state, and all the institutions that have been built in its image, it is incumbent upon us to disarticulate the logics that pass for the state or what it anoints. We must pause to interrogate

the claims to community and authority within which most of us are (still) afterthoughts, and far from trusted democratic constituents.

Even if the betrayal of the state feels uneven across the world map, making some of us wish that we had chosen “better” accidents of migration (a luxurious lament to be sure), the question remains: Why do we remain beholden to the hidden, begrudging, tongue-bit gestures of our most proclamatory, often white, left leaders and thinkers who have not yet had any success at building or defending a movement of marginalized Americans without resorting to nationalism+ or instrumentalist workerisms? Why must we tolerate, most of all now, the *merely* pandemic understandings of internationalism that fail to even properly mirror the crude complexity of empire’s own maps, just so that the happy American “socialist” can fall in love with its own image and exceptional nature? In mourning institutions, and in setting out to rebuild them from the ruins – which those who survive this will have to do – the desire to preserve what exists must not automatically mean an affirmation of what has existed. We did not consent to those existing forms either, and not for a moment must we fancy ourselves as guardians for that which is bound to kill us next, or give us a life sponsored by betrayals, which we must reject.

This moment is the future of something, of the rejected register of complaints never heard. When they saw Trump as an exception. When speaking about class meant speaking about economics alone. When disposable populations chose to trust private donors and the police, and our sovereign institutions were cool with that. When the settler state’s “weakening” was a prolonged cover-up for consensual fascist reconstruction. When they kept saying we hear you but continued to speak in the same way as before. When someone decided what efficient politics was, and stuck to it over piles of bodies and a denialism of the suffering of others. When kids went to business schools to learn to govern. When our own people thought even being pathologized could count as love. When the cop in the head was nurtured so well that even the beloved was not free from our wrath. When the cop in the head grew so intractable that offing it meant more mess than we could handle, so we just let it be, like a cancer too advanced to touch but that will kill us on its own time. When our friends became good company girls, and always cleaned up after the boys. If we have learnt anything, it is that we can no longer afford to see the nation-state that supposedly *gives* (even what it gives is ours to begin with, but nevermind) as different from the nation-state that then *takes* it away and gives us up. Any reinstated faith in the nation-state means condoning the presumed consensus on differential value of life, and consenting to the nature of citizenship as not something you are given but

as something that is harvested, something that can be taken away. It is important to interrogate these filiations, and think differently and again, what we will seek to preserve, with whom, and for whom.

Opting for cold leftist functionalisms, over and over again, when *so much* other thought exists, we hopelessly mimic these very institutions, once again refusing to account for how settler-coloniality provides the template for even our frames of community and authority, and what we bring home for our child or worker or friend is tainted with the poison, minimally, of betrayals and abandonments. If geopolitics purveyed by political scientists and technocrats continues to serve the template and tools to think through this crisis, then we have already been handed over. Why not accept our role in the complete farce of the already empty gesture of the post-war “global” or even our critical “globalization-from-below” projects that have failed to build a single international institution that could force even one issue out of the hands of the seeming ineffable forces of evil, and was not based in a colonial logic of redistribution of death (and not of life)? Who cares about the enemy: What were all of the “good people” doing? If all these “experts” were not able to bargain anything for us with others who were, as the protagonist in a film about a death cult tells us, “only people” – or when they did, only at the cost of our consciences and generations of those whose dead will come back for us, why should we trust them now? We must not accept that the choice is between who – prisoner, soldier, or political scientist – will dig the mass grave that can be seen from a satellite.

Displaced subjects, exiles walking through the desert, those uncounted by the state, never register on the scale of fate, destiny, or evil. These fugue figures – the fugitive from slavery, the refugee after the nation-state’s consolidation, or the migrant worker whom borders both within and outside the nation-state treat the same way – remain emblematic of the moment, even and especially as we discuss debt and rent strikes, and abolitionist futures, precisely because it captures the increasing absurdity of the claim that being *somewhere* assumes or assures *being*. With contingent and sacrificial essential labor ready to provide the template for contingent life, the contingency of being is no longer mitigated by being somewhere, exposing the lie of any shelter in place. So, who are we who must cease to be after ceasing to be *for the state*? This is where Ahmedis and Shias and Christians in Pakistan, Muslims and Dalits in India, black and indigenous populations in the USA and Brazil, refugees, immigrants, the unemployed, and the uninsured – just to name a few – testify that the dominant template of existence is literally one of eviction, of exit from spaces. (Or the solution, by extermination, of the impasse between the demand to evacuate and the border-as-prison-wall.)

Just like Andrew Cuomo wonders why we need buildings if there is technology so that all public university buildings can be privatized for a future of zombies, we are left to wonder how long before it is okay to say “if you can be a refugee, why do we need citizens?” Should we dignify that question or evade it?

At stake in what we choose to do with this question that looms, is more than a decision on who is or is not a citizen. It determines what—beyond just marking levels of privilege and disposability—a citizen would mean that a refugee would not, *and also* what the figures of the fugue have been foreshadowing for most of the last two centuries, but especially in the postcolonial consolidations of power and authority for the citizen to learn from. In some ways, the postcolonial necropolitical reality is complete when boundaries do their work not to contain but to expunge, to make disappear. The claims to fate and evil, as transcendent as they might sound, have absolutely no capacity to speak of those who do not belong *anywhere*, a fate not limited to the originary stateless or pariah anymore. Will we stay, or will we go? Yes.

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