

Saturday + Sunday

Saturday, Sunday — settling into a new normal. I'm no longer required to leave my house. My partner receives the news that his place of employment will be shut down for two weeks, but he will be paid. Celebration! Fear! This spaciousness is exhilarating and terrifying. I'm trying to structure my time, trying to figure out what of the seemingly infinite domestic tasks I could undertake to fit in alongside my obligations like grading student work. Am I to be idealistic about all the things I could accomplish? Can I embrace monasticism? I picture myself with thread and needle, suddenly gifted with the patience to embroider wall-hangings. Unfortunately I've brought into this seclusion my long-standing sense of inner disorganization; it's difficult to commit to non-essential projects. As was the case before the pandemic, it's hard to self-actualize from the space of my house — both too much and too little time — but I try to avoid letting the existential questions laid bare by the virus transfer to a similarly existential void around the activities of daily life, these small gestures of creative resilience and willingness to bring something new into the world.

What does the subtraction of ordinary life expose? Before the corona virus, it seemed implicit that what is necessary for the world right now (ecologically, at least) requires halting over-production. But this necessity has been made impossible or unthinkable by the abstraction of the economy and its unvanquishable requirements for belligerent hyper-productivity. And then something unthinkable makes that pause possible. is a silly question to ask but impossible not to think about. Will the ordinary ambivalence of the current economic system remain exposed as constructed and contingent in its cruelties? What would it take to center our labor around common needs and desires, something more impressionistically obvious about what kind of world we want to perpetuate? (Or more urgently, what is necessary for survival.)

A collective, social response to the pandemic is unfolding (albeit enacted through wide-spread acts of self-isolation). In this isolation, I feel like I'm a part of something. But I think about how the lesson of the pandemic shouldn't be that the internet and the socializing it enables will save us, but the undeniable fact of our physical bodies as mutual vulnerabilities is enough to stop the world-as-it-is and its perilous disregard for the ecologies our bodies depend upon, even despite the impossible momentum of capital. (Is that what's happening?)

The Crisis Times

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CORONAVIRUS, PRECARITY, + EMBODIED LABOR: WEEK ONE

[18 March 2020]

Monday

Monday morning, March 9th, an overheard conversation between two undergraduate students in a cafe:

“Tonight is the deadline for the University to decide if they are going to do all classes online next quarter, because of the virus stuff.”

“Do you think they'll do it?”

“Nah, I don't think so.”

Monday night, I got the email: *All UC San Diego classes to be held remotely in spring quarter*. Though drastic, the maneuver felt more precautionary than prescient or urgent. Friends speculated the move to remote instruction was a response to the wildcat graduate student strikes spreading through the UC system.

Tuesday

On Tuesday, the seed of disruption had been sown as the significance of next quarter's solitude settled in. I went to the store with Ethan and we bought vegetables, peanut butter, and bags of plantain chips and lentil pasta. I imagined every surface as covered with deadly invisibilia, but later sat at a table within five inches of friends, unafraid of their breathing. I started to feel the frenetic hum and inner heat produced by thoughts moving so quickly they were made illegible. That night, before falling asleep, I wrote about the virus against Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor*:

Whatever symbolic or poetic meaning projected upon the reality of the disease, or which the reality of this disease is wrapped up in, is as much about the world it exists within and travels through as it is about the illness itself. Talking about the virus is talking about a globalized world which moves at the rate of

its high-tech apparatuses but cannot actually account for the physical bodies which it is populated with: our vulnerabilities and our reliance upon the material world even when the normative processes of production stall or are hampered. Talking about the virus is talking about overproduction of things suddenly made useless by a microscopic contagion.

Wednesday

By Wednesday, the poetry reading was canceled; class was canceled. While at home that afternoon I tried to remember what “Community Immunity” means and revisited an essay by Ed Cohen. So many unfilled needs exposed by the virus — that’s what I wanted to write about.

Cohen’s essay is about the AIDS pandemic in South Africa and the problematic individuation (depoliticized, decontextualized) which biomedicine entails. Cohen contrasts this isolated approach with the collective permeability which something like a virus highlights. Because its problem is its transmissibility, the virus requires a social response. It requires tending to the social and material elements of being and staying well, which — for all their biological sophistication — the institutions of medicine aren’t positioned to contend with.

I imagined opening my essay about the virus by talking about how we experience the pandemic a mainly a problem of individual exposure when its peril exposes the deficit in the community’s *immune system*: its ability to mobilize defenses and response mechanisms. But isn’t that what everyone’s already talking about? And what immune system is prepared to deal with a novel exposure, beyond (perhaps) its familiarity with the *form* of a pandemic: the ability of an invisible new iteration of an ancient organism to wipe out its host?

So maybe our vulnerability to this particular corona virus is not the fault of industrial capitalism per se, or a paradigm which emphasizes the eradication of contagions rather than the cultivation of a healthy, resilient biosphere. But there are additional vulnerabilities industrial capitalism compounds because what is good for stopping the virus is bad for the economy. What is necessary for treating the virus and caring for the bodies (infected and otherwise) who continue to exist despite the economic slow-down requires a nimble response in the structures of medical care as well as material production and distribution. How do we decide, or who decides, what is important? What is essential?

BIOWEAPON TRUMPS CAPITALISM

A lot of work seems unessential, and yet without the remuneration it enables, basic existence is periled. As my teacher (a philosopher of medicine and science) said, “It makes it pretty clear that biopower trumps capitalism.”

Also on Wednesday I received a crash-course on living with pandemics (from the internet, from my mom). I learned that my deliberation about whether or not to take a trip to Seattle the following week as planned shouldn’t be a deliberation about whether or not I would be well, but about my role in the perpetuation of this wave. A wave whose calculability I fixated on, watching the numbers rise as if to verify my paranoid response. I was infected with an urge to explain the rationale of social isolation to all my friends. I played this missionary role to my partner, who was also slated to take this Seattle trip. Stretched on our bed, he said he wasn’t sure what the point would be in avoiding the airport because he works in retail, just another depot of human contagion.

Thursday

On Thursday, I went to the grocery store to pick up a few more things and was greeted with the sight of panic-buying: lines trailing into the aisles, shelves ransacked of their packaged goods. The frozen section of Trader Joe’s was nearly cleared out — black basins covered with flecks and crumbs that were visible for the first time. Only a few less popular items remained: frozen kale and cauliflower pizza crust; some sauce-covered microwavable chicken lunch. Suddenly, my hypothetical musings about the corona virus became so much less abstract, about how the precarity brought about by the virus is more than the physical vulnerability of being sick but the existential trial on the structures we are held inside of. Our reliance on them for our safe-keeping, for the maintenance of basic needs, felt clearly incidental to their existence; as if we were hacking them for that purpose. What underpaid, essential labor was being performed by the grocery store clerks and stockers. Not all labor can or should be performed virtually — we need to eat, after all. So what about that?

By Thursday, we have both decided that taking an airplane anywhere is absurd. A trail-running race I’d signed up for in January is canceled. Dominos of duties fall one after another.

Friday

By Friday, exhaustion from thinking too much. I eat tuna salad at a cafe during an in-person meeting, which feels transgressive. (The in-personness, not the food.)