

Listening in on *Dialogues:* *Blog of American Studies*

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Dialogues, our reenergized blog of *American Studies*, took shape during an *AMSJ* editorial meeting in March, just as the impacts of the pandemic began to set in. At that time, we planned to reimagine the work of 2020, and to think about the futures of American Studies for *AMSJ*'s blog. Enter COVID-19—and all that followed in the breaks of what was quickly dubbed “the normal.”

Since then, many have wondered about what this break reveals, often with a focus on something beyond the normal. In early April, novelist Arundhati Roy described the phenomena of global health crises as a kind of portal through which to imagine new socialities. “Historically,” Roy writes, “pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.”¹ On July 4, in the wake of uprisings for justice in response to the murders of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, and too many others, poet Dionne Brand responded to how dominant political discourses are managing the pandemic narrative as a calculus, rather than as a reckoning:

Those in power keep invoking “the normal” as in “when we get back to normal.” I’ve developed an aversion to that word normal. Of course, I understand the more benign meanings of normal; having dinner with friends, going to the movies, going back to work (not so benign). However, I have never

1. Roy, Arundhati. “The Pandemic is a Portal.” *Financial Times*, April 3, 2020. <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>

used it with any confidence in the first place; now, I find it noxious. The repetition of “when things return to normal” as if that normal, was not in contention. Was the violence against women normal? Was the anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism normal? Was white supremacy normal? Was the homelessness growing on the streets normal? Were homophobia and transphobia normal? Were pervasive surveillance and policing of Black and Indigenous and people of colour normal? Yes, I suppose all of that was normal. But, I and many other people hate that normal.²

Calls for a return to the normal can be embraced when “normality” is perceived as an uncontested reality. In other words, for whom is getting “back to normal” a good thing? Only months in, the pandemic continues to pull at the seams of what was understood as normal. The pandemic has been, even in this short time, both center stage and backdrop to uprisings against police violence, as well as to organized learning and teaching for otherwise possibilities: Black Lives Matter, Indigenous self-determination, resistance to anti-Asian and anti-Latinx racism, removal of memorials and statues, abolishing not only prisons but police, policing, detention centers, surveillance technologies. These represent just some of the strong currents moving thought and action in and around the United States.

At the heart of these multi-faceted, multi-racial, multi-generational movements is a deepening consensus that people see beyond the calculus. From that consensus also comes calls for something else, perhaps closer to what Brand described as a reckoning. That white supremacy, settler colonialism, and racial capitalism are even more visible in 2020—and that people are naming them as shapers of how life can be lived, how people can work and study, pray and protest—points to how the ongoing crises and rebellions have amplified the meaning of being together and not being together. As people do or do not shelter-in-place, choose or refuse to wear masks, and are required to learn and/or educate remotely or in-person, the terrains of what was normal continue to undergo a profound transformation. In what ways might these breaks redirect, shed new light, and perhaps present a “gateway between one world and the next”? And how might they be, at the same time, a living archive of the moment as it races forward?

The blog’s teaching CFP and series, “On Teaching in the Time of COVID-19,” asked teachers, researchers, librarians, and others to reflect on how the moment impacted people on and off campuses. Faithe Day’s “COVID Black: Organizing Information on Racial Health Disparities and Living Data” highlights the work of data researchers who collectively responded to the health crisis. With the backdrop of a growing death toll caused by COVID-19, Day reminds

2. Dionne Brand, “Dionne Brand: On narrative, reckoning and the calculus of living and dying.” *The Star*. Sat., July 4, 2020. <https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/books/2020/07/04/dionne-brand-on-narrative-reckoning-and-the-calculus-of-living-and-dying.html>

us that “those who are the most vulnerable among us deserve to be recognized.” Responses to this pandemic should not only be guided by histories of racialized data collection, but should also demand a radically different future. Joo Ok Kim’s “Radical Times, Continuities in Struggle” points to social media activism as a way to critique anti-Asian violence. The use of racist discourses deploying COVID-19 as a political tool also animate the counterstrategies that emerge from them. Kim’s pedagogical questions arose with students as she navigated their classroom dynamics, their distance learning, and free online education connecting people across the globe. Yumi Pak’s “Misreadings” recalls reading Barbara Christian’s essay “The Race for Theory” with her students, many who faced online learning while serving as essential workers. Looking to literature as a theoretical space of language and power, Pak and her students blurred lines between institutional categories and identities as the pandemic was disrupted by uprisings demanding justice for Black lives. Ashvin R. Kini’s “Narrative Reconstructions and Collective Knowledge” finds Kimberlé Crenshaw’s podcast *Intersectionality Matters* an important entry point for reading the pandemic. Kini reflects on what an attentive practice of listening—whether in a podcast conversation or in the virtual classroom with students—reveals about narrative reconstruction in crisis. Finally, July marked the first of a new *Dialogues* series called “Protest Poetics”—a platform for expanding dialogues about what protest means from our current vantage point. Ashon Crawley’s “Protest, Prayer” presents a deep meditation on breath, repetition, grief, and blackqueer possibility. As Crawley narrates: “To breathe for black life, blackqueer possibility, is prayer, is protest.”

Dialogues will continue to provide a platform for reflections on the meaning of teaching in American studies and adjacent fields. The changes and undercurrents written about in the following blog essays see those as centrally important to research, scholarship, activism, survival, and transformation—all of which require and desire exploratory, creative, and intellectual ground for navigating where this portal takes us. As Roy describes the path ahead: “We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.”

We are proud to mark this relaunch by reprinting a selection of the blog posts in this issue of *AMSJ*. We hope that they will inspire you to read along with us, and to contribute as we continue to build.