

Radical Times, Continuities in Struggle

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Photo by Mike Murase / *GIDRA*.

The recent *AMSJ* series *On Teaching in the Time of COVID-19* asks how American Studies and related fields attend to this moment of crisis. We might begin with the #JeNeSuisPasUnVirus movement in France, in which Asian-raced peoples digitally highlight their resistance against pandemic-related verbal and physical assaults that associate them with the novel coronavirus. And we might begin there to perceive the transnational histories that inform this crisis. Doing

so discloses overlapping colonialisms in Asia, calling for U.S. military aggressions in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos (in both known and “secret” wars) to be examined alongside the presence of differentiated Asian diasporas in France and in the United States.¹ Learning from #JeNeSuisPasUnVirus, a call to uncouple the contemporary conflation of racial “other” with the virus in *this* time, also requires the uncoupling from centuries of discourses affixing disease to differentially racialized human bodies, which is also *this* time.

Arundhati Roy’s recent naming of the pandemic as a portal for a different future and Saidiya Hartman’s meditations on the dramatically disproportioned death toll—“an exclusive tally of loss” accounting for American lives lost in the U.S. wars in Vietnam and Korea—further invites us to consider how the time of “in the Time of COVID-19” registers globally.² What Hartman calls an exclusive tally of loss, initially observing the media’s implicit refusal to consider the deaths of Asian peoples in the wars, registers differently with the current intensified scale of COVID-19 deaths among Black, Indigenous, and Latinx populations. The U.S. wars in Vietnam and Korea, the refugee diasporas from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos to the United States, and the militarized logic underwriting the migrations, are also entangled with the police murder of George Floyd. Tou Thao, the Hmong American police officer who stood by as Derek Chauvin killed Floyd, is entwined in this history. The “police action” known as the Korean War, which inaugurated the U.S. security state and extended the infrastructure of militarization to police, is interwoven in this history. The Korean War’s imprint on Black communities, and intensified Jim Crow policing throughout the 1950s, is linked to this history. On Toni Morrison’s Korean War novel, *Home*, A. J. Yumi Lee observes Morrison’s expansive thinking which “places the contemporary idioms of police and prison abolition and transformative justice in a broader historical and imaginative frame,” such that unended, ongoing, endless wars are not conceptually exempted from global protests demanding racial justice.³ Perhaps *On Teaching in the Time of COVID-19* asks us, as we negotiate the pedagogical imperatives of teaching, and of learning, to consider the time—refracted, recursive, anomalous—this virus punctures.

One example calling attention to this time is the “living data” of COVID Black, a Black digital humanities project which tasks community members and scholars to actively catalogue critical statistics and social stories of Black diasporic communities.⁴ The urgency of this digital project grasps not only the structured public health inequities for Black communities disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, but also the renewed global public attention to cen-

1. Sisavath, Davorn. “The US Secret War in Laos: Constructing an Archive from Military Waste.” *Radical History Review*, January 2019.

2. Roy, Arundhati. “The Pandemic is a Portal.” *Financial Times*, April 3, 2020. Hartman, Saidiya. “The Death Toll.” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, April 14, 2020.

3. Lee, A. J. Yumi. “Repairing Police Action after the Korean War in Toni Morrison’s *Home*.” *Radical History Review*, May 2020.

4. Day, Faithé. “COVID Black: Organizing Information on Racial Health Disparities and Living Data.” *AMSJ Blog*, April 27, 2020.

turies of anti-Black violence, an iteration of Hartman’s “The Death Toll.” As Dorothy Roberts and Ruha Benjamin remind us, in studying the years, decades, centuries of surveillance in this nation-state, whether codified as technology or not, is the application of emerging methods to further the suppression of Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian bodies.⁵ Their scholarship has also informed an open letter by critical public health scholars opposing public facial recognition technology, in response to the novel coronavirus in *this* time.⁶ The critical sweep of public health they define is broad, as the facial misrecognition impact of such technology represents an innovated continuation of racist policing and criminalization. The state’s logic of racialized criminality, alongside its willful, malignant articulation of racialized disposability, is compounded in the current COVID-19 outbreak at San Quentin, a California prison that has incarcerated—politically quarantined—Black revolutionaries such as George Jackson.

The accompanying image, a *Gidra* photograph of women workers at the zine, attended an earlier blog version of this piece, which focused on coalitional mobilizations against anti-Asian racism in the first few months of the global pandemic.⁷ But the era of the image registers too a 1973 song by A Grain of Sand: Music for the Struggle by Asians in America. Their song “Jonathan Jackson” is named for George Jackson’s brother, who was a teenager when killed by police at San Marin Courthouse during his attempt to free political prisoners. The final lyrics of the song—of a parent “Waiting for the phone call saying everything is fine / While the people on the outside / just take their time / just take their time / just take our time”—insist we seize this time, into the continuities of struggle.

May 26, 2020

5. Benjamin, Ruha and Dorothy Roberts. “Policing without the Police: Race, Technology, and the New Jim Code.” Haymarket Books Online Teach-In, July 8, 2020.

6. Public Health Scholars Opposition Letter to California’s AB 2261 on public facial recognition technology: <https://www.aclunc.org/sites/default/files/2020.05.01%20-%20Public-health%20letter%20FINAL.pdf>

7. Lee, Jaeah. “The Forgotten Zine of 1960s Asian-American Radicals.” *Topic*, February 2018. The blog title is “Racial Times in Asian Americanist Critique,” published May 26, 2020.